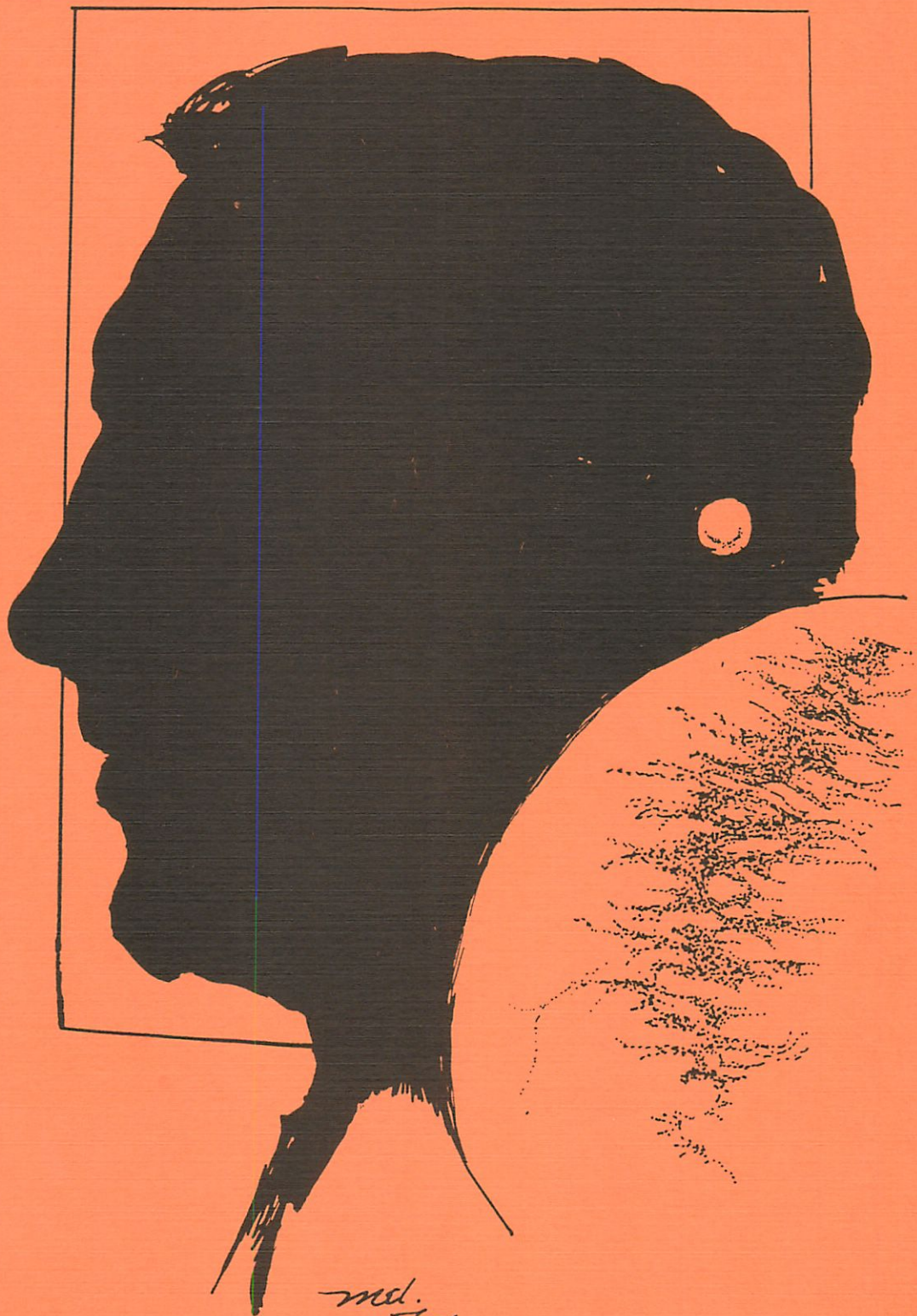


**PURPLE &
ORANGE?**

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PURPLE AND ORANGE? is intended solely for the enjoyment of fans of the ABC-TV series *BATTLESTAR GALACTICA*™ and *GALACTICA 1980*™. Submissions and letters of comment are both encouraged and welcomed. All correspondence will be considered for publication unless clearly noted otherwise. All submissions and correspondence should be addressed to PURPLE AND ORANGE?, c/o OSIRIS Publications, 8928 North Olcott Avenue, Morton Grove, Illinois 60053.

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EDITORIAL: SOME THOUGHTS ON MEDIA SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

Nearly every author in the broad field we term "science fiction and fantasy" has his or her fans -- individuals who especially enjoy that writer's work. No one can fault a reader for appreciating the creations of such professionals as Robert Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, Tanith Lee, David Brin, R. A. MacAvoy -- to name only a few. And what of such artists as Michael Whelan and Victoria Poyser, among others? These people, too, are professionals; like the finest of writers, they have earned their fans, and truly deserve them.

But what of that area of science fiction/fantasy termed "media"? And what of the fans of media science fiction and fantasy?

We've all heard of the "Trekkies" -- those particularly obnoxious fans of the popular television series STAR TREK. And this editor knows from personal experience just how unpleasant such overly enthusiastic fans can be. Try to imagine, if you will, attempting to teach some of the basics of relativity theory (not exactly an easy subject to master!) to a Trekkie who is convinced that everything depicted in the STAR TREK series is 100% factual! After ten weeks of this sort of thing, we felt the violent termination of this particular individual would properly be called "justifiable homicide" -- or maybe would be classified as a favour to the rest of the human race.

But not all media fans are extremists, and to assume they are is to do a grave injustice to the vast majority of all fandom. Groupies are the exception, not the rule -- and they are just as prevalent outside the science fiction/fantasy community as in it.

The saner fans of STAR TREK began to call themselves "Trekkers" not long after their more vehement colleagues began to make a somewhat unsavoury reputation for themselves -- and, unfortunately, for the rest of media fandom as well. Media fans began to be looked down upon -- people without the intelligence to appreciate the literature of science fiction and fantasy, perhaps, or people who simply went to extremes with their fantasies...

But there is a great wealth of good media science fiction. Who can deny the merits of such films as THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL or FORBIDDEN PLANET, or 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY, or BLADE RUNNER, or even that remarkably delightful bit of visual escapism, STAR WARS? And can any true science fiction/fantasy fan claim to be completely uninterested in seeing what will be done with the film versions of DUNE and 2010? Is there really, somewhere, a fan who has never speculated on the visualization of cherished favourites of literature?

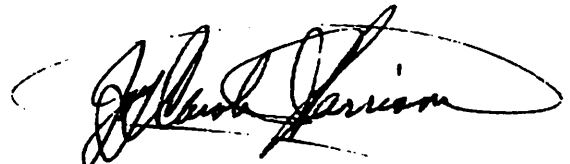
Television, too, has left its mark on science fiction and fantasy, although with few contributions as noteworthy as those of the film medium. STAR TREK did serve a purpose, however, as did such series as THE TWILIGHT ZONE, THE OUTER LIMITS, and even THE AVENGERS. Not all television is totally worthless -- although, of course, the vast majority of it remains barely mediocre.

But then, a large percentage of what is written in the field of science fiction/fantasy is pretty dreadful, too. It's not just the media -- it's simply that the majority of science fiction and fantasy, like the majority of everything else, is not always as good as we might wish it to be.

It would be wrong for any science fiction/fantasy fan to denigrate the general category of "media science fiction" -- just as it would be wrong to deride the written word. Certainly, the majority of truly excellent science fiction has never been committed to film, and those who never read are missing some of the most magnificent tales science fiction and fantasy have to offer. But those who refuse to accept science fiction and fantasy in the theatre or on television are missing something, too.

We have no use for groupies -- those overly enthusiastic fans of any breed -- whether they be the fanatically loyal, devoted followers of a film, a television series, an actor, an artist, a book, or a writer. But there is no shame in enjoying good media science fiction and fantasy -- or in enjoying a good book.

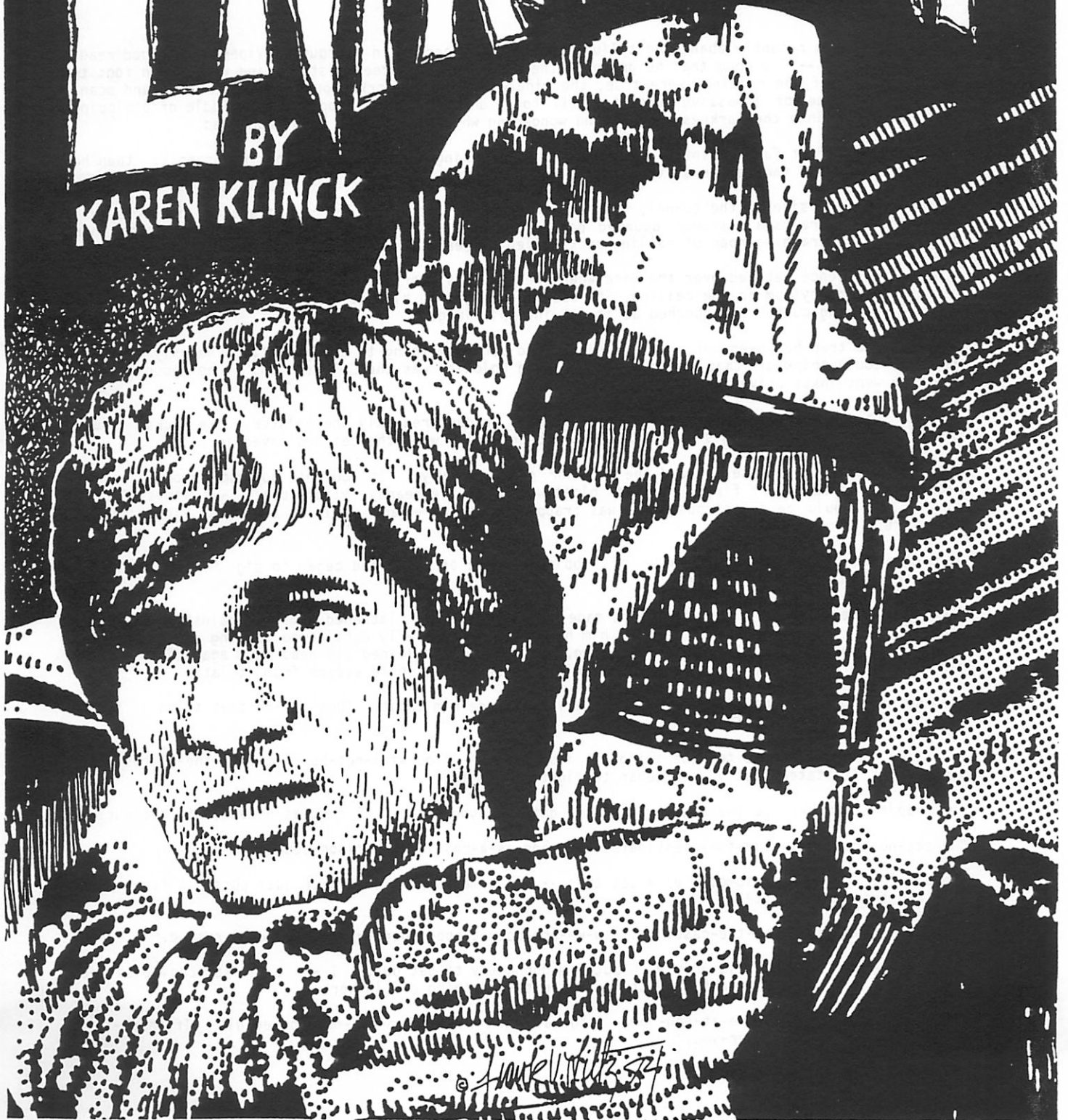
And we truly pity anyone who cannot appreciate both.



Joy Carole Harrison
Senior Editor/OSIRIS Publications

ENTRAPMENT

BY
KAREN KLINCK



© Hank Wiltz '84

"Entrapment"

(By Karen Klinck)

It looked like a recently abandoned tylium mine. The scanners in Starbuck's Viper gave good read-outs, however -- so good that he grounded the craft at a discreet distance and went in on foot to investigate. If the readings were true, the mine was far from worked out. His portable hand scanner gave evidence of a massive deposit still to be uncovered; he stood in the middle of a sloping shaft, peering into the darkness ahead, and wondering why the mine had been abandoned.

He moved a few feet farther into the darkness. A cracking noise made him look up sharply; then he desperately jumped farther in as the ceiling collapsed.

He rolled to the side of the tunnel, where he curled into a tight ball for protection, his arms over his head. Several small stones bounced painfully off him, but none caused any damage other than bruises. The crashing roar of falling rock filled his ears.

A profound silence settled over the mine when the fall was over. In the peculiar glow cast by scattered chunks of tylium in the ceiling, Starbuck slowly got to his feet and looked around through the haze of settling dust. He coughed as it got into his lungs.

A deliberate trap had been set; he supposed he had done something to trigger it. The only intelligence he could think of that would want to trap a Colonial was the Cylons, and as he thought that, his hand went instinctively to his laser.

The man's blood ran cold when his questing fingers encountered only the holster. He looked around frantically, and realized his weapon must have been buried when the ceiling caved in.

Common sense asserted itself, and the Warrior grinned wryly. It wouldn't do much good to have a weapon that he dared not fire. A laser blast would set the nearby tylium ablaze -- witness Carillon. That would be disastrous. He was trapped in the mine and would be the first victim of any such fire.

He made a face at the imposing pile of rubble in front of him, and began to dig an escape route. His oxygen wouldn't last forever.

Some time later, a heavy scraping sound made him turn, and he flattened himself against the debris, the sight of a Cylon Centurion leaving him hopeless. He briefly considered dodging around it and running -- but where could he go? Panting, he sat down and leaned his head back against the clutter, waiting for the machine to claim its prize. Perhaps he could escape from it later.

When it next moved, some dregs of self-preservation made him shout, "Don't fire that thing in here! You'll set off the tylium!"

The Cylon momentarily halted the swing of its weapon. "You-will-not-benefit-from-the-success-of-your-trap," it stated flatly, and began to sight on him again.

"My trap?" Starbuck repeated angrily. "It's gotta be your trap. I sure as Hades can't get out!"

"We-set-no-trap. I-came-to-investigate-this-mine-as-a-possible-garrison-source."

"So did I... You mean someone else set this -- for some unknown enemy, or just possibly for anyone else who tried to use it?"

"That-would-appear-to-be-the-case. If-so-we-are-both-trapped-here-without-hope-of-rescue."

"You may be," Starbuck said grimly, "but I'm gonna try to get out. I won't let somebody else get the best of me without a fight. Just don't shoot that thing off in here."

"There-is-no-reason-to-fire-at-you-now. You-are-unarmed. I-am-far-more-powerful. If-there-is-need-I-can-easily-overpower-you."

"Thanks," Starbuck muttered, and scrambled awkwardly to his feet to attack the fallen rock once more.

"You-attempt-to-clear-the-passage-again?"

"Just enough to get out."

"Logical. I-will-join-you."

Starbuck's skin crawled as the Centurion came alongside him and began flinging rocks away. He tried to ignore his resentment, admitting to himself that his adversary was shifting far more than he would have been able to move. And the machine was tireless, while the man was not. He was fast becoming exhausted.

The Cylon spoke again. "Your-functions-are-slowng. You-need-an-overhaul."

"I need a rest," the Warrior panted.

"Then-take-one."

With a sour look at the oblivious Centurion, Starbuck went over to a large boulder at the side of the tunnel and sat down with a weary sigh. He didn't want to move, and suddenly realized that the oxygen in the mine was almost exhausted. His exertions, or "dead" air from the shaft, had used more than he'd thought. Somehow, though, this failed to worry him as it should.

The human watched lethargically as the Cylon moved another large rock from the base of the pile. A whole slide, dislodged by the shifted boulder, cascaded onto the animated machine, knocking it over and burying it thoroughly.

The Warrior gave his now-vanished last chance a dull look of despair. The Cylon's steady digging might have brought air into the trap in time, but Starbuck, in his present condition, could never do so alone.

After a short time, he noticed that a new light was supplementing the odd tylum glow -- more reddish-coloured light, although almost as dim as the source it joined, which was why the oxygen-starved man had missed it at first.

Starbuck stumbled drunkenly over the rubble-strewn floor and slowly clambered up the jumbled boulders to press his face toward the fresh air coming through the hole in the rocks. He took deep breaths until his chest stopped heaving. More alert, he saw that the hole was large enough to crawl through, and he started out.

Something stopped him; it felt wrong. He couldn't go any farther.

He slowly turned back into the tunnel, cursing himself for a fool.

Sliding painfully down to the bottom of the fall, the Warrior began shifting debris from the rock-covered Cylon. The human's instincts warned him that the Centurion couldn't be trusted, that once this escape hole was noticed, it would try to kill its reluctant ally -- but his conscience wouldn't let him go without freeing the machine.

It took him the better part of a centar to free the Cylon, a centar punctuated by several trips to the hole for more air. Most of these were documented without comment by the machine. It only spoke once.

"Why-do-you-visit-the-opening? Are-you-seeking-rescue?"

Starbuck tried to phrase his words as close to Cylon terminology as he could as he replied, "The atmosphere contains a substance necessary for my functioning. It is all but gone in here."

The Cylon made no reply to this.

Between them, they made short work of enlarging the opening in the rockfall to accommodate the Centurion. Starbuck had to stop and catch his breath again, so the Cylon went out first. It reached back into the hole and casually hauled the human out. When it set Starbuck on his feet, it shifted its hand to hold the man's behind his back.

Exhausted and filthy, Starbuck surveyed the two Centurions standing there, their weapons pointed at him, and shrugged. He had, after all, expected something like this. They must have arrived some time after his last visit to the air-hole.

He might curse his luck later, but all he wanted to do now was rest. The Cylons conferred for a moment, and despite the fact that he was undoubtedly the reason for the conversation, he was too tired to cudgel his brain into understanding their mechanical speech.

His former companion-in-misery abruptly shoved him down a faint path, still holding his wrists behind him; the others went into the mine through the escape hole. Starbuck guessed he was being taken to the fighter craft the three had arrived in.

His Centurion's left leg clicked noticeably with each step, and shifted with each click. Transposed into human terms, this would have been a limp. The Warrior began to feel slightly desperate. In his current condition, he couldn't have escaped from Boxey, much less from his unwanted mechanical companion.

"Have-you-recovered-your-functioning?"

Startled at being noticed after such a long silence, the Lieutenant stumbled as he turned his head to stare at his captor.

"I guess so," he croaked through a throat dry with dust. "Why? Going to torture me immediately?"

For answer, the Cylon pushed him away. Starbuck landed on his hands and knees, got hurriedly to his feet to run, then watched curiously as the Centurion toppled itself over, buckling its left leg with a loud crack.

"If-you-aided-a-Cylon-once-it-is-logical-to-assume-you-will-do-so-again," the Centurion said, completing his answer to the man's question. "Therefore-even-though-you-are-a-Colonial-Warrior-it-would-be-incorrect-to-destroy-you. There-is-an-example-for-this. He-is-called-Baltar."

"I'd only help one of you in the same sort of trouble we just got out of," Starbuck objected, deeply offended. "And only if it helped me out the same way."

"Naturally. That-data-was-incorporated-into-the-formation-of-my-statement. I-will-tell-my-fellow-Cylons-you-escaped-when-my-leg-buckled. They-will-not-be-able-to-follow-you."

The Warrior stared at the Centurion a moment longer, then turned and trotted away. He pushed his tired body to the limit, wanting to be in his Viper and well away before the other Cylons came to investigate. He suspected they would not view the matter in the same light.

The mine was a dead loss; even if the Cylons didn't take it over, any humans to visit it would walk in constant fear of other booby traps. They couldn't mine enough tylium under those circumstances. It just wasn't worth it.

As his Viper streaked into the blackness of space, Starbuck wondered how his report would be received. He wouldn't blame people for not believing it...

There were parts he didn't quite believe himself.



"The Gift"

(By Mary Robertson)

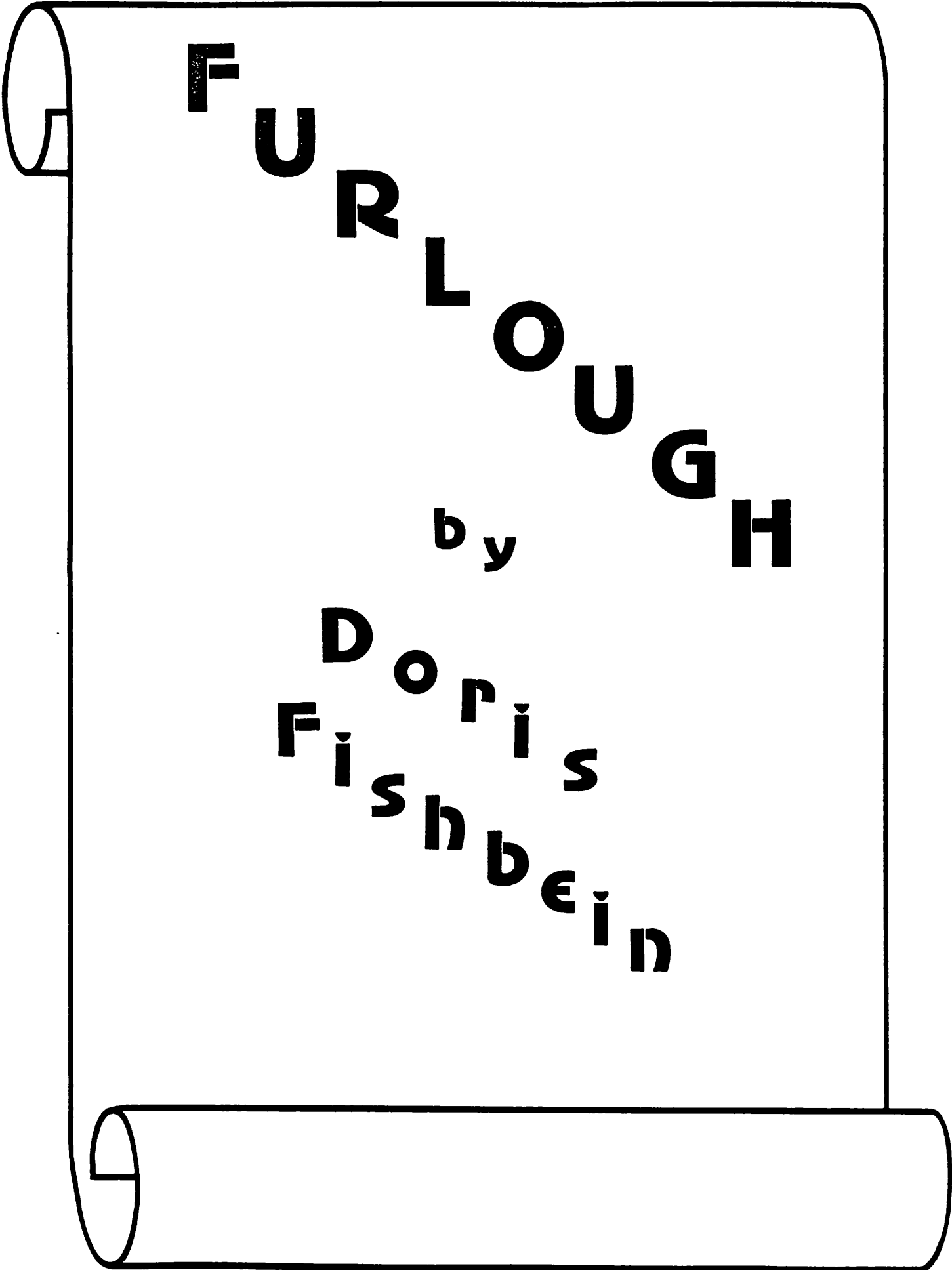


Today I met my future -- or my past.
I'm not sure which it was. In truth, it's fast
Becoming more a dream than memory.
My friend was killed today. I watched him die,
And wept. My grief was real enough to try
My very soul, and yet tonight he lives.

I met a man today, a wintry man
Who claimed my life in payment for that span
Of days cut short, though he did not collect.
He said I would forget; in time, events
Would fade to merest shadows, sentiments
Would swiftly dim. I'm not so sure of that.

I called him angel. He would not deny
The name, and yet he named me brother. Why?
Are we the remnants of some common race?
I guess I'll never know. My spectres might
Be angels, or the ancient Lords of Light,
For who would know the Lords if they returned?

Today, I found a shining ship of light --
Or it found me. It touched my mind with bright,
Consuming fire, then as swiftly withdrew;
And in its wake, I lost my dearest friend,
Then found him once again. I won't pretend
To understand. His life is gift enough.



FURLOUGH
by
Doris Fishbein

"Furlough"

(By Doris Fishbein)

It was an exhausting several centars. The unknown foe had launched a sustained attack, and the Warriors were hard-pressed to keep them from reaching the Fleet. Several ships were damaged, but none seriously. Whoever their enemy was -- probably pirates -- they took serious losses before re-treating, permitting the Colonial Warriors to return to their base.

The GALACTICA's landing bays were crowded with medical personnel and shuttlecraft. While none of the ships had been badly damaged in the surprise attack, there were still many injuries, and overloaded medical stations on the other ships sent their worst cases to the better-equipped Life Centre of the battleship. Most of the Warriors, tired as they were, took the time to help with the flood of casualties.

When the emergency was finally under control, the weary Warriors returned to their Ready Room, most of them hoping for nothing more than food and sleep. Cassiopeia went looking for one of the Warriors in Blue Squadron; one very disinterested pilot told her the man she wanted was still in the turboshower. The pilot promptly rolled over in his bunk and went back to sleep.

"Thanks, Boomer," the woman said -- and immediately barged into the Blue Squadron male cleansing facilities. "Starbuck, I have to talk to you," she announced firmly, then turned and walked out, to the consternation and embarrassment of several men.

The pilot she'd addressed was out in a centon, still dripping wet, a towel wrapped around his hips and a uniform in his arms. "What's so important, Cassie? I know you love my body, but you don't have to join the whole squadron in the shower to see it..." he teased. The other guys would be kidding him for a long time, and he figured he had the right to get in first digs.

She ignored his humorous comment; he could see, then, that it was something important. "What is it, Cassie?" he demanded more seriously.

"Chameleon was on the RISING STAR, and it took a hit. He's pretty badly hurt; he's here in Life Centre. I thought you'd want to know, and come see him, just in case..."

Starbuck blanched. He considered the old man a good friend. "How bad is it, really?" He suspected Cassiopeia wasn't telling him everything.

"We're not sure yet, but I think you should be there. Starbuck, I think you should know...he really *is* your father." She braced herself for his reaction.

The man froze, staring in disbelief for a long centon. "Oh, my God," he breathed.

* * * * *

The quarters were decorated with cultured good taste and carefully understated elegance. The woman who occupied the cabin, one of the best accommodations on the small luxury liner MEMPHIS, now the "senior ship," had been wealthy before the Destruction; with that wealth had come true quality. The young man sitting quietly in a thickly-padded chair, staring at the wall mural opposite without really seeing it, had gotten to know her well-appointed quarters very well during the past few days. His father dwelt there, with the woman who'd made herself responsible for him -- with Commander Adama's blessings.

Siress Blassie watched thoughtfully from the archway to the bedchamber. She was a tall, slender woman with silver-blond hair and a sophisticated style, and she felt close to both father and son, although in different ways. During the first few days after Chameleon was injured, Starbuck hadn't left his father's side. When the older man had finally been released from Life Centre and had returned to the MEMPHIS, his son had often fallen asleep in the very chair where he was now sitting. Chameleon was content to spend much of his time in bed; Starbuck kept occupied by trying to amuse him, and by running errands for Blassie, who'd also appointed herself "nurse" for the older man. To the widowed woman, it was almost like having a family again.

More recently, however, the young Lieutenant seemed less happy. His Commander had freely given him an extended furlough, but the time seemed to weigh heavily on him. Blassie would often find him in the living chamber, sitting in the chair, a pensive look on his face, as though he'd lost something very precious.

Perhaps he's already bored, spending so much time with two old people, she thought. Perhaps he wants to return to his friends on the GALACTICA...

Cassiopeia stopped by whenever she could spare the time -- *I like her, despite her previous occupation! -- and Apollo and Boomer -- handsome Warriors, and such gentlemen! -- also visited frequently. But it can't be the same for Starbuck as sharing their daily lives...*

Sireess Blassie retreated quietly into the inner chamber.

A few centons later, Starbuck's melancholy reverie was broken as Chameleon and Blassie entered the room where he sat. He rose to his feet and rapidly crossed the room to take his father's arm. Chameleon wasn't back to full health or strength yet, and made his walks around the ship leaning on his son or Blassie -- or both. Starbuck smiled for his father, although there was a reserve and weariness in his expression that hadn't been there in the first, more critical, days of recovery.

Chameleon gestured toward a couch, and Starbuck helped him sit down, watching worriedly as the old man sighed and smiled up at him. He seemed tired.

"Are you all right...father?"

Chameleon missed the short pause in his son's words. "Oh, I feel fine, Starbuck," he laughed ruefully, "but I guess I'm not as strong as I thought. You'll have to make that trip to the RISING STAR yourself tonight." The repaired ship was reopening several gaming rooms, with much fanfare.

"Oh."

The pause that followed was awkward. Blassie discovered a reason to leave her quarters for a moment, and quickly departed, leaving the two men alone.

Starbuck sat down again, in what he'd come to consider "his" chair, across from the couch where his father rested.

"No, no, Starbuck," Chameleon protested immediately. "I don't want you tying yourself here on my account. You're dressed up, and we were counting on an evening of fun. Why don't you go by yourself, and stop by the GALACTICA? Perhaps some of your friends will be interested in trying our new system. You can test it, and tomorrow, we can try to work out the flaws."

Starbuck laughed half-heartedly. "If you'll be okay..."

Chameleon waved. "I'll be fine. Blassie'll be back in a centon -- she never trusts me alone and out of her sight for long, and you know how good she's been to both of us this past secton."

"True enough. Probably the best thing you ever did, convincing her to take over your 'rehabilitation' like that."

The old man made a wry face at his son's remark, but had to agree. "She didn't need much convincing. Go on, son. I'll spend a quiet evening at home. I may even get to like it."

Starbuck stiffened slightly at the term "son," but his father didn't seem to notice. "All right. Say goodbye to Sireess Blassie for me. I'll see you in the morning." He picked up his uniform cape and prepared to leave.

"You could call her Blassie, you know. I think she'd like something a little less formal from you."

The young Warrior, already at the door, shrugged, but presented a smile to his father. "What I think she'd really like me to be calling her is 'mother,' but that's your problem. I'll try to remember...father, if it'll make you both happy. Take care of yourself." He waved, and the door closed behind him.

Chameleon frowned, concerned, but waited until Blassie returned a centon later. Her arched eyebrows asked the question; he simply shook his head. "He won't say what's bothering him, even when we're alone. Perhaps he's simply bored here, away from his friends and the risks of his duties, but it seems like something more, something that goes deeper..."

"You may be right, but at least he'll have an evening out. Perhaps that'll help him," she replied

firmly. "He may talk to his friends, to Apollo and Boomer, or perhaps to Cassiopeia. I'm glad you decided to let him go."

"You wouldn't let me out of bed if I didn't promise!" he retorted without rancour. "But I wish he would talk to me, whatever it is..."

"Not tonight. Now, what shall we do? I've a deck of cards, all ready for you to shuffle. What was that system of pyramid you wanted Starbuck to test tonight? It sounded quite interesting when you discussed it today."

"You can't really be interested in pyramid!" the man exclaimed with some surprise.

"It's that or the video, since you obviously can't go out when you've already informed your son that you're too weak to be wandering about. Everybody knows you and Starbuck by now, and they'd mention it to him if you were seen out and about tonight. So, which shall it be -- pyramid, or that woman journalist?"

He made a face as he considered. He didn't care much for the newswoman. Zara's interview with Starbuck was what had brought them together the first time -- but she was also the one who'd made a big event of it when his son was accused of murdering one of his squadron mates, a triad opponent with shady connections and a foul temper. "I'll teach you a version of pyramid they used to play in the Quaneed sector on Libra, before they got blasted by the Cylons."

And so the elegant, cultured, sophisticated Siress Blassie spent the evening learning the most common of card games, from a scoundrel of a man whose quirks and habits still fascinated her.

* * * * *

"Captain? Got a micron?"

"Yes? Oh, Starbuck, c'mon in. I wasn't expecting you, but I've got time. How's your father?" Apollo finished fastening his shirt and gestured his friend to a seat. Starbuck hadn't been aboard the battleship in well over a section, since Chameleon was released from Life Centre, and the Captain had seen little of him in that time.

"He's...good, recovering well, I guess. He still feels weak, at times," Starbuck replied without much spirit, slouching into the chair.

"Is Siress Blassie doing him any good?" Apollo detected uneasiness in his friend's behaviour, and was concerned. He doubted the woman was causing any difficulties between father and son, but asking a few questions might shed some light on the problem.

The Lieutenant smiled, less reluctantly. "Trying to be more than a gaoler. She's not as obvious as Belloby was with your father, but she's more persistent, and she's got more class."

Apollo laughed. It had seemed, once, that Siress Belloby, an old...friend?...of Adama's, would force herself into the family, having the Commander quite literally over an energizer coil -- and the thought of calling the loud, brassy woman "mother" had both amused and horrified him. Fortunately, Starbuck's intervention at a critical moment had saved the day -- and convinced the bold woman to actively seek younger companionship.

Now, perhaps Chameleon was being cornered in the same manner as Adama had nearly been. "Is she having any success?" the Captain asked innocently, trying not to smile.

"Not much." Starbuck was visibly unwinding, chuckling at the memory of Siress Belloby. "Chameleon's very good at keeping a certain distance, even in shared quarters."

"Like you? I think Athena's planning on visiting you and your father one of these days."

The Lieutenant's smile faded, and he squirmed a little. "She'll have to visit me here. That's why I came, Apollo. I'd like to request the rest of my furlough be cancelled, so I can return to active duty."

"Are you crazy?"

His friend shrugged. "I've been accused of it."

Apollo sat down next to him. "Starbuck, is something wrong? We thought you'd want some time with Chameleon, to get to know him, and set things in order."

"What things? We know each other; we've been friends since we met. He's doing fine, in no danger any more. I'm needed here, now."

"Awkward, maybe, to call him father? That's what your time together was supposed to do, get rid of the awkwardness... You seemed glad enough of the time before..."

"Look," Starbuck interrupted, "are you going to cancel my leave, or not? I can come back any time..."

"Hey!" Apollo held up a restraining hand. "If it's that important..." He was surprised at his friend's impatient outburst, but he was sure the Lieutenant would get over it, and would apologize later, in some fashion or other. He strode over to his desk, and pulled a form from the sheaf of bureaucratic paperwork that constantly littered his quarters. It took only a moment to fill in all the required blanks. Then he turned the sheet around, and held out a stylus. "You have to sign it; otherwise, I have to come up with a disciplinary reason."

"That shouldn't be too difficult," Starbuck muttered, but he signed his name in the proper places. Apollo notarized it, and fed it into the terminal on his desk for filing.

The men stared at each other across the desk. The Captain wasn't sure what to say, and his friend had no inclination to apologize at that moment, or to explain anything.

"He's coming! With Aunt Athena!" Boxey scampered into the room like a small brown-haired cyclone, dashing into his father's arms before greeting Starbuck. "Hi, Uncle Starbuck. Are you coming with us?"

Starbuck stared in confusion as Apollo's face lit up. "Am I interrupting something?"

Apollo shook his head, then rose, his smile widening as Commander Adama and his sister Athena entered the cabin. Boxey promptly squirmed free of his father and ran to the older man.

"Are you accompanying us, Lieutenant? Your father must be feeling better," Adama welcomed him -- Starbuck winced -- while Athena gave him her prettiest smile, which was indeed lovely, as she was dressed in a simple but becoming pink celebration gown. Starbuck hadn't thought to wonder why his friend was in dress blues; now, he concluded that the family was celebrating some occasion or other.

"Uh...I'm not really..." he stuttered.

"Please do," Athena chimed in. "We'd love to have you..." She allowed the invitation to dangle, with just a hint of suggestion, as Starbuck, uncomfortable, glanced quickly at the Commander.

Adama, now holding Boxey's active form, was trying valiantly to avoid being tripped by the yipping mechanical daggit at his feet. He looked up and smiled. "My errant grandson and even more errant children cajoled me into dinner aboard the *RISING STAR* for a change," he explained.

"But it's your birthday, father, and you take too little time off as it is," Apollo insisted, turning pink himself at being referred to as "errant," but grinning, too. The whole group was in a festive mood.

Celebrating their father's birthday. Starbuck felt short of breath, then shook his head decisively. "No, I've got things to do yet tonight, and I promised I'd be back early. Have fun...and, uh, happy birthday, Commander." He excused himself, and practically ran from Apollo's quarters.

Celebrating their father's birthday -- as they'd probably done for yahrens, as they'd celebrated holidays and other birthdays, and as they'd gathered together to mourn and remember Ila, and Zac, and Serina. The survivors of a family, still close, and finding occasions for happiness. A tradition of togetherness. *A family...*

* * * * *

Cassiopeia finally caught up with Starbuck aboard the *LADY OF ARGO*, now an orphan ship. She hadn't had time to talk to him in days. Hearing he was on the *GALACTICA*, she'd gone looking for him, but he'd already left, so she followed him.

A friend had seen the man, and directed her to a converted theatre, now a nursery where children four yahrens old and younger were sheltered. Starbuck was watching a group of youngsters play together. Several of them had just learned to walk, and were carefully stepping around smaller friends as they played with makeshift toys.

Cassiopeia put on a professional smile from the old days, then stopped in shock at the realization

of what she'd done, and drew a smile from the heart as she approached him. "Hi, Starbuck," she said softly, touching his shoulder. "Cute, aren't they?"

The man stiffened in surprise, then relaxed, but still seemed uncomfortable. "Hi, Cassiopeia. What brings you here?" He was watching one of the small boys, who was trying to build something from a collection of foam blocks.

"I haven't seen much of you recently, so I thought it might be nice, if you have a little time, just to talk or something..." Her voice trailed away as she realized he was paying her no attention, but had his eyes fixed vacantly on the child's growing tower.

The toddler had completed his lopsided architectural creation. He leaned back, yelled, and swiped at the block tower, sending pieces of foam in every direction. Starbuck closed his eyes and winced, a pained look on his face.

"Starbuck? Are you all right?" Cassiopeia asked in swift concern. He glanced at her in astonished uncertainty, as though he'd just that instant become aware of her presence.

"I'm fine. Why?"

"You seem...distant. Is there something on your mind?" He grimaced, trying to shrug off her question. "Thinking of adopting one of the kids?" she teased, knowing well enough his opinion of his own fathering ability.

"No!" The answer was so brusque that she knew it concealed anger.

"Then what's wrong?" she asked helplessly. "If there's something on your mind, and you'd like to talk about it..."

"Don't interfere, Cassie."

It took several centons for her to locate what she was sure was a safe subject of discussion. "How is Chameleon today?" she asked meekly.

Starbuck's eyes turned a wintry shade of blue, and the woman thought for a moment that he'd explode at her. "He's fine," he finally said through clenched teeth. "Now, will you quit bothering me?"

She stared in disbelief. *Is this truly Starbuck...?*

The man had her lover's blue eyes; she recognized the golden hair; a touch would prove those were the same broad shoulders she knew so well. But the words and the expression were those of a complete stranger, somebody she wasn't sure she liked.

She stepped back, afraid for a micron of this stranger, who stubbornly turned away from her, back toward the children, his mouth set in a cold, grim line.

"Who are you, anyway?" she asked slowly.

"I'm sure you know that better than I," he snapped curtly.

"What...what are you talking about? Has this got something to do with your father?"

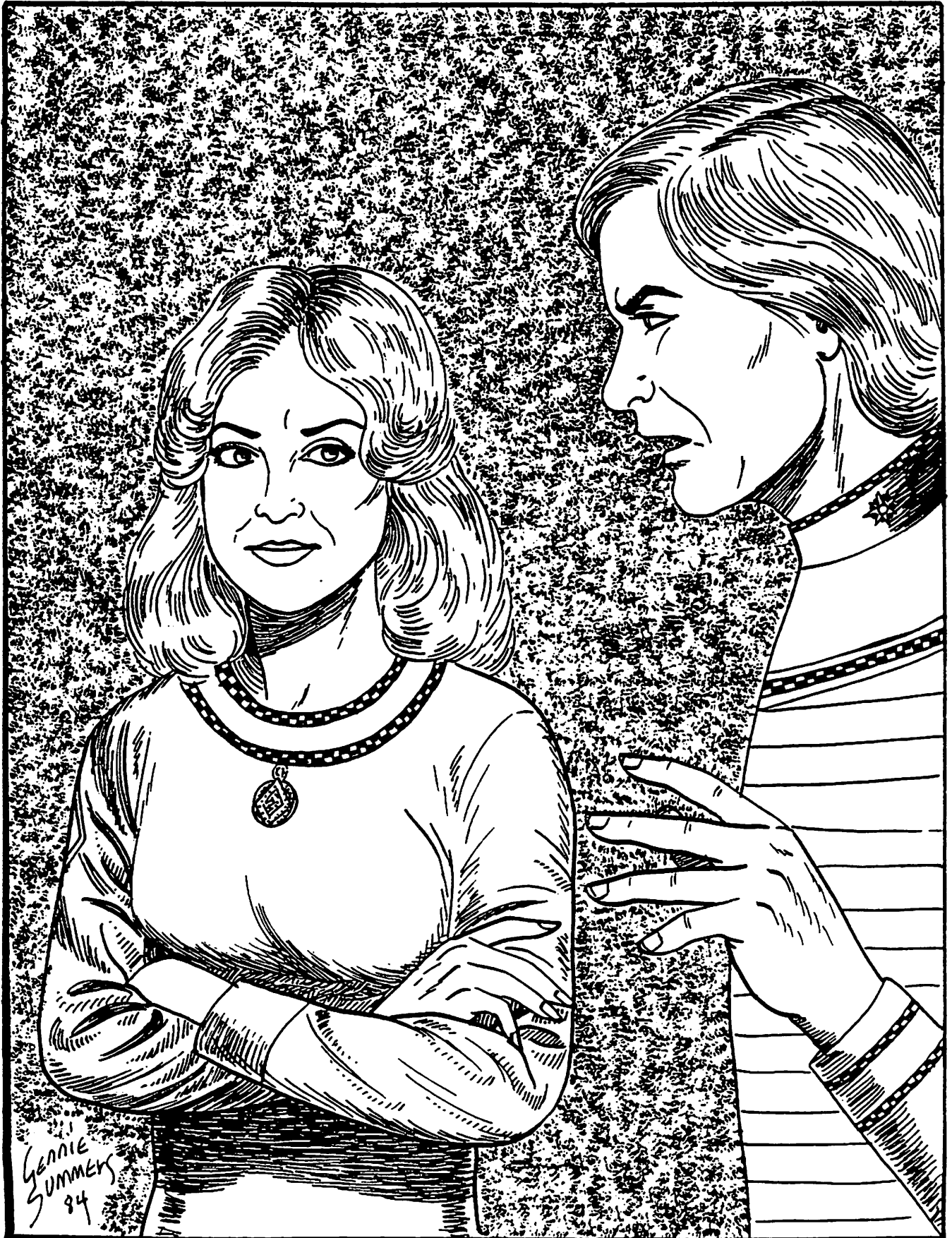
He glanced at her briefly, and she could tell the anger in him was building to an explosion point. But he didn't reply; he simply looked away from her. She knew her own anger was being roused by his callous silence.

"Well, are you going to tell me, or not?" she finally demanded.

"Just a question or two. Anything else you've been keeping secret from me? After all, you know more about my past than I do! We aren't accidentally brother and sister, or anything like that?" he demanded sarcastically. The pain hidden in his voice cut her to the heart, made her just a bit ashamed, although she couldn't explain why.

She glared back at him, her face white with rising anger. He was hurting, but he had no right to take it out on her. "No, Lieutenant, nothing like that. But I think I've just found out something that shows your true character!" she nearly screamed, her hand twitching in a desire to strike him for his words. Instead, she spun on her heel and stalked away.

"My character?" He caught up with her, nearly bruising her arm as he spun her around to face him.



"Why'd you even bother, Cassie? You'd kept your secret for so long, why'd you break down and tell me he was my father? Huh?"

"Get your hands off me," she demanded coldly.

"Guilt, maybe? Afraid of what I'd think of you if my father died without my ever knowing who he was? You told me when he couldn't stop you. Did he want me to know -- *ever*? Did he send you on your mission of mercy, or was it your own idea? Why in Hades did you even bother?"

"I really don't know!" she snapped back. "But Hades may well be where you belong! Now, *get your hands off me!*" she screamed in fury.

He nearly threw her away, laughing bitterly. "Of course, my dear Siress," he replied sarcastically. "Anything you say. Should've been doing that all along. I can see things real clear from here -- maybe for the first time since I met you. I've finally seen *your* character, without any of your socialator's wiles to cloud my mind. I don't particularly like what I see, either!"

They locked bitter glares for a long centon. It was a toss-up as to which of them broke away first. Cassiopeia fled to the shuttle waiting lounge, needing a place to cool off for a while. Starbuck remained where he was, watching the children play, his face as bleak and cold as a carved piece of stone, until his frozen grimness dissolved into desolation.

He leaned against the wall, feeling incredibly weary as the impersonal metal surface cooled his forehead -- but it could do nothing for his spirit. "Why'd she get to me like that? What did I ever do to deserve this? Why'd they lie to me for so long?" he asked the wall. It didn't respond.

He didn't return to the MEMPHIS that night, or the next day.

* * * * *

The intensity of the shouting match with Cassiopeia seemed to take the fight out of him, leaving him deflated, moody, and easily depressed. Apollo noticed it almost immediately, when a subdued and reticent Starbuck returned to the flight roster. He didn't seem interested in playing pyramid or in partying -- or in any of his favourite pastimes. He never saw Cassiopeia, occasionally spent time with Athena, but was not seen in the company of other women. His performance on patrols seemed half-hearted, as though both instinct and interest had been deadened. Nothing could rouse him again.

After a section, Apollo'd had enough. He talked to Athena; she'd noticed that something was bothering the man, but he wasn't talking about it to *her*, and her only comment was that she was glad he was at least paying *some* attention to her again.

The other pilots, who saw little of Starbuck, simply assumed he was spending time with his father, but Apollo knew that wasn't the case. Boomer admitted that Starbuck seemed quiet, but thought it was probably a passing moodiness, a result of his father's injuries, which had been severe. He expected the Lieutenant's usual exuberance to return soon.

Finally, Apollo felt he had no recourse but to speak directly to Starbuck.

He cornered his friend in a back corridor, where he was wandering aimlessly, with no apparent destination in mind. "All right, Starbuck, would you care to talk about it?"

"Talk about what?" the man countered quietly.

"Something's got you down," Apollo persisted. "I want to know what it is."

Starbuck grimaced, shrugged, and looked very much like he wanted to go elsewhere. "Nothing's wrong," he answered.

"I don't believe that. I've been watching. You haven't been interested in *anything* recently. Not even Cassiopeia." The Lieutenant stiffened, and a flash of anger crossed his face, but was rapidly replaced by something more controlled. "I know you haven't seen your father since you got back on the roster, and that's not like you..."

"How would you know? Keeping tabs on me these days?" Starbuck demanded with an edge of sarcasm in his voice.

"I'm just concerned, that's all..."

"Look, will you quit sticking your nose into my personal life, Captain?"

"I'm not trying to interfere, Starbuck, but if there's something wrong, I'd like to help." Apollo was doing his best to control both his surprise and his temper.

"You can help by staying out of my business! I can handle it myself!"

"Like you've been handling it this past section? You're not yourself these days. Starbuck, I'm concerned..."

"By what right? Who made you my keeper?" he stormed, cutting loose. "It's none of your business, and I'd appreciate it if you'd just stay out of it!"

Apollo froze for a moment, then levelled a glare of his most frosty, authoritarian rage at his friend. "What affects the performance of my squadrons *is* my business," he seethed in clipped, precisely controlled tones. "I won't press it now, since you insist, for the sake of our friendship, but you'd better shape up, or I'll *really* start intruding. In fact, it might do us both good if you went back on leave until you get this worked out!"

The other man glared back at him. "Like Hades!"

"Precisely like Hades, if necessary, *Lieutenant!*"

Apollo stalked away, leaving Starbuck staring open-mouthed. He'd gone too far, and the Captain had replied in kind. He felt a childish urge to kick, scream, and throw things, but forced down the angry tantrum.

* * * * *

As far as Apollo was concerned, the next step was Cassiopeia. She provided very little help, declaring that where Starbuck was concerned, she knew nothing, and wanted to know less. Then she refused to discuss the matter further.

Next, he went to the MEMPHIS to visit Chameleon, who had been the focus of Apollo's worries about Starbuck from the beginning. He found the old man in Blassie's quarters, where he spent most of his time. The woman tactfully left to visit some friends, declaring affectionately that she was sure Chameleon was secure in the Captain's keeping. Her choice of words startled him, but it was obviously unintentional.

Perhaps a centar later, after a few questions, an explanation, and a discussion of what either of them could do about Starbuck's behaviour, Apollo left the ship with a thoughtful expression on his face.

Starbuck had been so elated when he first discovered Chameleon and learned he might be the old com-man's son. Then, when Apollo questioned Chameleon's motives, the Lieutenant had been furious, denouncing their friendship. He'd risked his life when the Borellians followed their blood hunt after Chameleon to the GALACTICA.

Apollo remembered his friend's disappointment when the genetic trace was reported negative, although Starbuck had tried his best to hide his emotions when he learned he still had no known family. Despite that, affection and friendship had grown between the two men. Strange that Starbuck had grown so close to a man who'd admitted using him -- as close as if they really were father and son.

Then Chameleon had been injured on the RISING STAR; Cassiopeia had admitted the genetic scan was actually positive; and Adama had given the Lieutenant a furlough to spend with Chameleon. Concern for his father had worn Starbuck out over that long two sections.

Apollo wondered if that anxiousness had somehow backfired as Starbuck tried to sort out his emotions. The young Lieutenant disliked admitting his feelings, or acknowledging relationships -- and, short of settling down to marriage with a woman, the relationship of father and son was one of the closest a man could have. Apollo knew both relationships from his own experience, and could sympathize with Starbuck's lack of mental equilibrium, now that he was beginning to realize its true depth.

Chameleon, in his quarters, knew better. He guessed, from observation and from Blassie's sharp notice -- as Apollo did not -- that the problem was more than merely adjusting to a new relationship. Something about them truly troubled Starbuck -- and if he couldn't discover what it was, he might lose his son forever.

He was so caught up in his thoughts that he didn't notice when the door opened without a page chime.

A cold voice laced with accusation broke his concentration. "I hadn't realized you were both in on this together," Starbuck said bitterly.

"What...?" Chameleon stared at his son's dismal expression, perilously close to that of a betrayed man. The Lieutenant's mouth twitched, trying to show contempt, but an uncontrollable trembling said otherwise, that he was barely keeping his emotions in check.

"You and Captain Apollo. I saw him leaving here a few centons ago. Did you send him after me, like you sent Cassiopeia? How much did he know all this time?"

The old man didn't understand the reference to Cassiopeia, but he knew he had to defend Apollo's visit. He'd nearly cost Starbuck the Captain's friendship when they first met; he certainly wasn't going to let his son think he was scheming against him with his best friend.

"Apollo just wanted to see how I was doing..."

"Ha! I talked to him this morning, and it doesn't take a genius to figure out how his mind works, or yours."

The men stared at each other. The Lieutenant was breathing heavily, as if his lungs couldn't obtain enough oxygen to keep him on his feet. Chameleon's expression was somehow pleading. He'd an idea what the problem was now, and although he dreaded the explosion that might occur, it had to be dealt with before it was too late, or he might lose Starbuck's respect and love forever. *Though Lords know he has little reason to love and respect me, after what I've done...*

"Starbuck, let's talk," the old man entreated.

The younger man simply turned away and left.

Blassie dashed into the room at an undignified pace only a centon later. "I saw Starbuck leave," she began somewhat breathlessly. One look at the grief on Chameleon's face told her enough. "Nothing is resolved, then?"

"He thinks I'm conspiring against him, keeping things from him. He thinks Cassie and Apollo know things I'm not telling him, and he doesn't trust any of us any more. He won't even talk to me, Blassie," he finished mournfully, his gentle face twisted with sadness.

"Well, we can't let that go on," she stated in exasperation. "Oh, Chameleon, you don't look well at all! I do believe all this stress is having a bad effect on your recovery. Please, lie down while I summon a medic..."

* * * * *

Starbuck wanted no company; he stole away from the Ready Room on the pretext of checking out his ship. Once in the launch bay, he pulled out a fumerello and leaned against his Viper, needing some time to think.

He was getting damned tired of being angry and/or depressed and/or suspicious all the time. It ran against his nature, and something inside him was fighting it. But the woman he thought he loved had kept secret from him news that once would have put him in orbit from sheer happiness. His father had used him, then denied him, then called him back again when in fear of his life. And his best friend appeared to be in on the conspiracy, always prying into his personal life.

The worst of it was that he still loved his father. It would've been easy to walk away if he didn't care, but Chameleon had become a good friend, had behaved almost like a father, had always been ready and glad to spend a little time with him. *So why did he refuse to acknowledge me as his son before, when he first knew it was true? And why did Cassie go along with it...?*

He'd been willing to understand and accept that Chameleon needed a way out when facing Borellian assassins -- one did what one had to in order to survive -- but why did the old man turn away from him later? Their meeting had been accidental; Chameleon had no idea they might actually be related. *But why did he reject me later? He'd accepted me as a friend; why not as a son...?*

Starbuck wanted to kick something, or maybe get in his Viper and blow a few Raiders to shrapnel. Maybe that would set his mind in order, soothe the seething sense of hurt.

He still loved his father, but he felt hurt when he thought of the sectars he could've had that knowledge, the realization that his father had kept it from him. He knew Chameleon loved him; he could see it in the old man -- but the hurt inside would always whisper at him, make him wonder. If not for the injury, would Chameleon have ever told him?

"Damn it all!" he swore to his silent ship, blowing a puff of smoke onto its gleaming finish. "It'd be easy if I didn't care about the old bum. Say 'goodbye, thanks for the ride, and see ya around.' But I *like* him." *And I don't know why he hurt me like this...*

"Starbuck!"

He groaned as he turned to see Apollo hurrying toward him. "What is it, Captain?" he asked, being as militarily formal as he could.

"Your father..." Apollo was a bit out of breath.

"Yeah?" Starbuck was wary.

"Relapse of some kind. He's not well. Cassie's over there seeing to him, said I should call you..."

"Why?" Starbuck was skeptical. If Cassie was involved, and Apollo... He watched the Captain closely. He could always tell when his friend was lying, or trying to hide something. The man had no guile in him; his conscience wouldn't permit it. But he could detect no evidence of falsehood.

"Starbuck, he's your *father*!" Apollo exploded. "Doesn't that mean anything? What in Hades has gotten into you?"

"Maybe 'father' means something to you. You've had one all your life!" he retorted. "But this is a new thing for me, and for him, too! And I'm not sure he likes it this way!"

"You don't think he cares about you?" Apollo stared at him incredulously.

"Of course, he cares, it's just..." Starbuck didn't know what to say; he felt cornered.

"Do you care about him?"

"Damned right I do!"

"Then go to him."

* * * * *

He recognized the blonde head of the woman leaning over his father's bed. Cassiopeia looked up at the sound of his entry, her face carefully emptying of emotion when she saw who it was that stood in the archway.

"I'll be back later to check on you again," she murmured to Chameleon. "Stay in bed for the rest of the day; don't weary yourself. I'd recommend that you not overtax your strength for the next few days. Don't hesitate to call me if you feel the slightest pain."

Her attention still on her patient, the med tech gave Starbuck instructions in a reproachful voice. "Don't do or say anything to distress him, Lieutenant. Your father is still not a well man."

"How bad...?" he began in a whisper, but she brushed past him without a word more, closing the door behind her, leaving him alone with his father.

He approached the bed, swallowing hard before speaking, seeing the frail old man's bright eyes watch him hopefully. "Hello, father."

"I'm glad you came, Starbuck."

His heart skipped a beat. Chameleon's voice held the peaceful serenity of a man who has accepted his fate and is prepared for it. Anxiously, he dropped to his knees next to the bed, reaching with shaking fingers for the old man's hand. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"As right as any man my age can be," was the sighed reply. "But Cassie tells me I'll be fine. A little stress was upsetting the healing process, that's all."

My fault! "Is there anything I can do for you, father?" Tears pricked at his eyes. *I'm responsible for this relapse...*

"Yes, son, there is. Will you please tell me what I've done wrong, that you've turned away from me?"

Starbuck wasn't prepared for that. He bowed his head for a moment, stunned and ashamed. "I... It's nothing, father, just... I haven't turned from you..."

"Then tell me what's disturbing you. I'd like to know; maybe I can help." His father sounded so concerned. "I've had a lot of experience with problems. You'd be surprised what I know," he added helpfully.

Starbuck's throat was tight. How could he tell this sick old man what was destroying his trust, leaving only a desperate love that craved to be acknowledged, begged to be shared? "Father, it..."

"Please, Starbuck. It hurts to see you suffering so, and not be able to help..."

"All right, I'll tell you." Licking his lips and closing his eyes, Starbuck began to speak. "All my life, I've had lots of friends, lots of people around me. But I've never had a family. I've dreamed...fantasized about what it would be like to find my parents somehow, to have a real mother, a real father, not foster parents..."

"Oh, they were good to me, but I always knew I didn't belong with them. I had no past, no way of knowing where I was really from, not even how old I really was, or when my birthday was. I'd dream about strangers showing up at the door some day, a rich grandparent or uncle, someone who'd been looking for me since the Cylon raid, who was willing to take me as family and tell me who I was.

"Wishful thinking. I thought I was over it by the time I entered the Academy. And after the Destruction...well, nobody seemed to have much left in the line of family. So I didn't think it mattered to me any more..."

"Then I met you on the *RISING STAR*. You gave me that story about looking for a long-lost son, sent me to seventh heaven, thinking my kid's dream might finally be coming true... But you just needed a way off the ship, a Warrior's protection from the Borellians. And I turned out to be it. Nearly got killed for it, said a lot of stupid things along the way -- but it felt good, thinking I'd finally found a family, even if we two were all that was left of it. I didn't feel so *alone*, any longer..."

Chameleon's grip tightened on his fingers; Starbuck risked opening his eyes long enough to see tears glistening on the old man's cheeks. Then he continued, looking away. *This is the hard part...*

"But you were just...using me. It was a greater surprise to you that it turned out to be the truth, after all. But for some reason, you decided not to tell me that. I don't understand why." He could feel his voice shaking; he swallowed hard. "You knew I was really your son; you could have let it stand at that. We could've had all this time together..."

"But we've had the time together, as friends," Chameleon interrupted, his voice gentle.

"Yes... We've been friends. You freed me from any obligation to you, and now you've called me back... When Cassie told me, I was so scared you'd die on me, I didn't even think... But now..."

"I swore Cassie to secrecy. She broke her word to me. I wanted to save the news for a better time..."

"What? What better time? Why?" Starbuck pleaded. He ignored the tears; he couldn't have stopped them if he'd tried.

"I wanted to save it for your sealing day. I thought it would work better that way. Don't be angry with Cassie, son; I made her do it. I may have been wrong, but she kept her silence because I wanted her to."

"But *why* did you want it that way...?"

Chameleon's arm reached out to pull him closer. "Son, do you remember what you said when you were showing me your ship, just before the Borellians came?"

"I...I was going to help you... We were going to make up for lost time..."

"You were going to resign from the Service, give up your friends, spend all your time with me -- and I wasn't even really a genetic tracer! I didn't deserve that kind of devotion from you. I really didn't, and still don't..."

"But..."

"Do you really think, after all we've both been through in our lives, that we could find those lost yahrens again? That we could make it as if they had never been? There've been many times I wanted

to tell you, but that's always held me back -- I couldn't let you give up everything you held dear just for that. It would've been the most selfish thing I could've done. I couldn't destroy your life like that." The old man sounded very convinced of what he was saying, gently remonstrating with his son -- and Starbuck felt in his heart that it was the truth.

"But you *would* have told me?" he persisted. "You would have let me know some time?" He had to know *that*, at least.

"I told you -- probably on your sealing day. There's not much else an old scoundrel like me could give you, besides a worse reputation than you've already got! I explained all that to Cassie; I had to, or she wouldn't promise..."

"You didn't tell her...?" Starbuck suddenly felt trapped. If Chameleon had told her what he'd said about *her*...

The old man laughed. "No, son, that's for you to tell her, if or when you ever decide for sure. I don't intend to interfere in your life that way. I made her promise, against her wishes, for your sake. Don't be angry with her. Make up with her; she cares about you, very much..."

His son's smile was tentative and watery. "I know. She's put up with a lot from me, and stood by me, too. I'll make up with her -- if she'll ever see me again. I said some pretty awful things to her, and I don't know if she'll ever forgive me..."

"Try her. She's a wonderful woman."

"No matchmaking, father." Starbuck managed a quavering laugh.

"All right, son. But will you forgive me? I didn't want to hurt you. I thought it was for the best..."

"If you'll forgive me. I didn't think..."

"I guess I should've explained things to you, too, instead of just to Cassie. Promise me, Starbuck, that you'll never change your life for me. I love you just the way you are, just because you're my son. You don't have to live up to some image..."

Starbuck's embrace was spontaneous. He'd heard all he needed to hear; the breach was healed. And it probably wouldn't take much, with both of them working on it, to find the trust again.

* * * * *

Sireess Blassie permitted herself a slight smile as Apollo stared gravely at the closed door. Cassie had a somber look on her face as she quietly paced the floor; but, then, even if Starbuck accepted Chameleon's explanation, there was no guarantee he would reconcile with her.

"How bad is he, really?" Apollo asked the med tech.

The woman stared at him for a moment, blinking, then suddenly smiled a little, shaking her head. "Oh, he's fine. A little tired and worried, that's all."

"But Sireess Blassie made it sound..." He stared from one woman to the other.

"If *you* hadn't believed Chameleon was truly in danger of his life, neither would Starbuck. He knows you too well, Captain," Blassie chided, an innocent smile on her aristocratic face.

The Captain's jaw dropped, and he looked accusingly at Cassiopeia. "You...you *lied*! It was all a scheme...!"

"All Blassie's idea," Cassiopeia demurred.

"And well executed," Apollo declared, gazing at the old woman, who sat calmly on her couch.

"But to a good end, wouldn't you say, Captain? Chameleon need merely spend a day or two in bed, to complete the charade, and Starbuck need know no more until he has better adapted to being a son again," Blassie stated with quiet pride.

"You're very good at manipulating people, you know that?" the Captain asked in surprise.

She raised her perfectly lined eyebrows. "Manipulating people is beneath my dignity, Captain. But as I assume you meant that as a form of compliment, I will accept it as such."



Cassiopeia fidgeted as she stared at the door. "It's my fault. I should've realized how Starbuck would react, once he had time to think about it. He's very sensitive, whether he'll admit it or not. He just hides his real feelings so well..."

"You were too close, child," Blassie interrupted maternally. "Just give him a little time. Things will work out, for both of you."

The younger woman blushed a little at her senior's knowing glance. "I'd better get back to the GALACTICA, then, and check my real patients. I'm supposed to be working here! I'll be back later, Siress Blassie. Thank you -- for both their sakes." She touched Blassie's proffered hand for a micron, then left the chamber.

"I should go, too," Apollo commented thoughtfully. "Somehow, I doubt Starbuck will need me to keep the shuttle waiting. I don't think he'll be back on the GALACTICA tonight. Good thing I kept his furlough in the records; I can just re-key it for a few days, with no excess paperwork. I'm sure he'll fill me in on the necessary details when he apologizes for being such an ass this past section. You're a devious woman, Siress Blassie. Remind me to be careful when you're around!"

The woman smiled easily. "Of course, Captain. Do come again; we all enjoy your company." She gave no further elaboration; Apollo had the distinct impression she was concealing mirth.

Impulsively, he leaned over and kissed her on the cheek before leaving. "Thanks -- for all three of them." He winked.

A delicate rose colour flushed her cheeks as the young man left. Yes, Starbuck's friends were certainly fine people. And despite her less-than-pristine past, gentle Cassiopeia would be a fine addition to the most aristocratic of families -- not that pasts mattered much in their new lives on the Fleet.

Siress Blassie steepled her hands before her as she settled back further into the crushed velvet of her couch. Her smile was enigmatic.

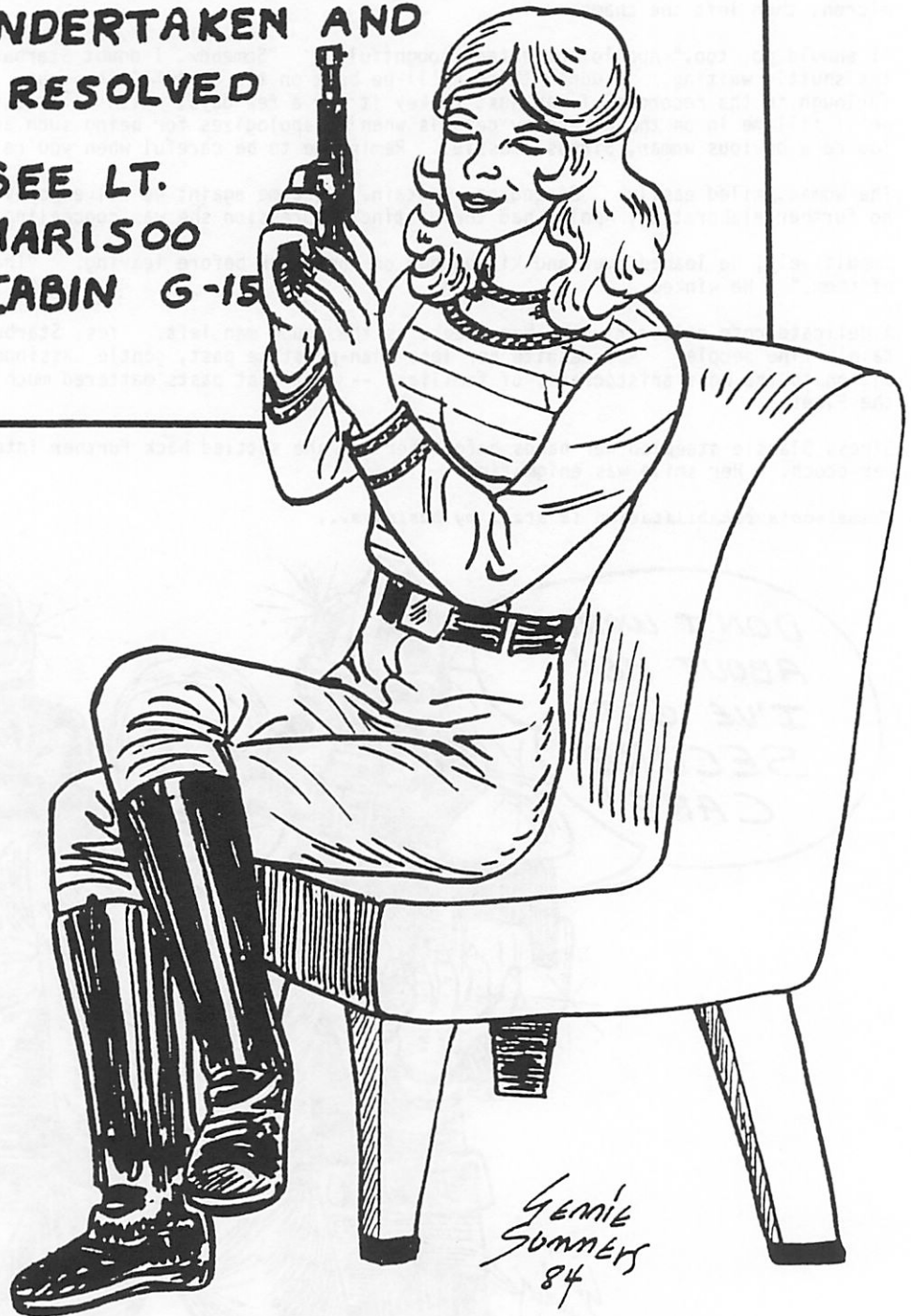
Chameleon's rehabilitation is still my business...



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The ULTIMATE VICTOR



by Mary S. Jones

"The Ultimate Victor"

(By Mary S. Jones)

A wrecked Cylon shuttle, no signs of life... But then Apollo and Starbuck found her -- a beautiful young blonde, encased in a battered cryogenic tube. She was alive, and seemed unharmed. They brought her back to the GALACTICA, where, with the permission of Commander Adama and Doctor Salik, the intelligent, quick-witted woman trained as a Viper pilot and member of the elite Speciality Squad.

But amnesia overshadowed her past, and her one real memory brought little comfort or friendship. Was the traitor Baltar truly her father?

Marisoo proved her worth on a contact mission. Shuttle sabotage nearly claimed the lives of Apollo and Starbuck, but her intervention saved both men. When religious fanatics decided Apollo was the son of a god, who must die for "his people," it was Marisoo again who saved Starbuck from a bloody sacrifice, and who opened the crypt in which Apollo had been entombed alive.

These people were not of the Thirteenth Tribe. Their mission a failure, the three Warriors left the planet, only to encounter a worse enemy. Marisoo's instruments went dead in a surprise attack; and Apollo and Starbuck could be only microns from oblivion as the Cylons closed in on the helpless shuttle...

Part IV

Hidden in the dim shadows of the Cylon landing bay, Marisoo paused a moment to catch her breath. The Cylons had towed her crippled Viper aboard their basestar, then turned their attention toward the captive shuttle and its occupants.

They hadn't counted on anyone surviving the attack on the Viper, and were therefore unprepared for the lithe young cadet's counterattack. As the cockpit was opened, she'd leapt out firing. Only two Cylons had stood guard over her crumpled ship; she dumped their laser-shattered forms into the nearest waste disposal chute, then darted away to find a hiding place.

Sheltered between a railed staircase and a clutter of empty supply cases, she silently watched as her two friends were almost literally dragged from their vessel, their arms shackled, still struggling futilely against their stronger metal foes. Two of the enemy detached themselves from that group, moving closer to Marisoo's hiding place. She caught her breath in a gasp and ducked further into the darkness, praying she wouldn't be detected.

The noisy footsteps stopped at the foot of the stairs; she held her breath. "Take-the-Captain-to-Commander-Baltar," the one ordered. "He-wishes-to-interrogate-the-prisoner-personally. Place-Lieutenant-Starbuck-in-a-confinement-cell."

"By-your-command."

The Cylons separated. Marisoo caught a glimpse of golden metal as one of them climbed the stairs, every metallic clang pounding into her senses like a death knell for her friends. The other Cylon retraced its footsteps to carry the orders back to its companions.

Scarcely breathing, Marisoo forced herself to inch forward and peer past the stairs. Captain Apollo was striding toward her, accompanied by several guards. He held his head high, trying to maintain a sense of dignity and pride. But his face was bleak, his lips tightly pressed together.

Starbuck was less concerned with appearances. She could hear his curses as he was led away.

The girl ducked back again, waiting as Apollo and his guard climbed the stairs, disappearing into a corridor. The man's quietly dignified steps contrasted with his guards' harsh footfalls so completely that she knew she'd be able to follow wherever Apollo was taken -- but she doubted she could do anything for him alone.

And he would be with Baltar -- a man she both needed to face, and dreaded to think of meeting. *Can he really be my father...?*

Marisoo took several deep breaths as she considered her options. Following Starbuck first would be the better choice. There would be less chance of sounding an alarm. There ought to be fewer of the Cylon guards she was sure Baltar surrounded himself with. Then, with Starbuck free, they could devise a plan to rescue the Captain.

Besides, who in his -- or *her* -- right mind would try to break *into* a Cylon prison?

Following the Lieutenant wasn't difficult. The brash Warrior's furious comments on everything from Cylon ancestry and reproduction to the intelligence level of their Imperious Leader brought no response from his emotionless captors, but did make him easy to locate. His volume level also covered any mistaken moves on her part that might otherwise alert the Cylons to another human presence.

It was only a short distance to the prisoner confinement cells, and Starbuck fought every inch of the way. Once there, and tossed bodily into one of the cells, his curses quieted to a few deprecatory statements on the decor of the small cubicle before he fell silent.

After noting his exact location, the Cadet was able, by dint of very carefully sneaking past guard squadrons in the surrounding corridors, to position herself above the main prison control consoles. There, she secreted herself in a small ventilation conduit no Cylon could ever fit into, wriggling her slender form into a perfect location to spy upon the Cylons. There were no obstructions to her view; she couldn't be seen from below; and she had a clean line of fire.

She studied the area thoroughly before making a move. She noted the number of Cylons present at any time, and timed the arrival and departure of other guards. Cylons loved an ordered schedule, she knew, and arranged their activities as regularly as possible. She would use that facet of their nature against them, at the right moment...

* * * * *

Adama stared dismally at the Life Centre statistics. Over one hundred sixty people had contracted the mysterious disease, mostly Warriors, flight crew technicians, and bridge personnel. Much as he hated to admit it, much as the possibility appalled him, he had to accept Salik's theory -- this disease had likely originated with Cadet Marisoo. Apollo and Starbuck had found the girl who might be Baltar's daughter, and who was probably a Cylon agent, whatever her origin. But was she a willing tool, or an unfortunate dupe, caught in their trap herself?

She'd have to have an opportunity to speak for herself -- justice demanded it -- but Adama couldn't risk any more lives; if anything he did at this point could protect his people from this strange, plague-like malady...

With a deep sigh and a sad wish that he could do something more, he touched a switch on the comm at his desk. "Security," he demanded without any sign of hesitation.

"Major Terrence here," came the immediate response.

"Have teams standing by in both landing bays, Major -- full decontamination gear. When Captain Apollo's party returns, you are to place both him and Lieutenant Starbuck in quarantine.

"Cadet Marisoo is to be immediately arrested and confined to medical isolation. Do whatever you have to in order to carry out these orders.

"Above all, prevent any of them from mixing with the general crew. Do you understand?"

"I understand, sir," came the business-like answer; Adama thought he detected an undercurrent of glee. "We'll take them into custody as soon as they return, using whatever force necessary."

The Major rang off. Adama had the feeling the Security men would take great and obvious pleasure in arresting one Warrior and dragging two others off to quarantine. He prayed the three Warriors would understand the necessity of his actions.

Commander Adama sighed, resting his head on his hands. It all weighed so heavily on him now, for even Colonel Tigh had been stricken ill, and there was no one else to help carry the burden...

* * * * *

"Welcome aboard, Apollo. You don't know how pleased I am to see you."

Apollo stared up at Baltar's slow, malicious greeting. If his arms hadn't been shackled behind him, and if he'd had access to a weapon...

"So you escaped the planet." He kept his blistering curses to himself; he had to be careful what he said to Baltar. The traitor was no fool, and he was still a very dangerous man.

Baltar chuckled at his response, then descended the steps of his throne-like seat. His dark-garbed figure stood out against the starkly-lit, almost empty room. He retained his sadistic smile as he studied his prisoner's unyielding gaze.

"Adama's whelp looks as stubborn as the old man himself," he commented to the gently humming mobile computer aide following obsequiously behind him. "Do you think he'll change his tune with the proper persuasion, Lucifer?"

"Our experiments have shown that every human has a breaking point when torture is properly applied."

Apollo shuddered involuntarily, then steeled himself to face his coming ordeal. He could read in Baltar's expectant smile that it would not be easy for him; the man would show no mercy to the son of his greatest enemy.

* * * * *

If her timing was right, *now* was the best moment.

She dropped free of the ventilation duct in several swift, graceful motions, landing soundlessly next to a railing behind the Cylon control panel. They had barely become aware of her presence before she started firing.

Three Cylons were falling in metal shrapnel heaps before the fourth and fifth could turn to face her. They, too, were destroyed before getting off a laser shot.

Marisoo raced to the cell door and blasted it. Starbuck stared in shock for less than a micron before pure joy replaced his stupefaction.

"Marisoo! *You're alive!*" He leapt forward, catching her in a rib-crushing embrace.

"Starbuck!" she managed to gasp.

"How in Hades did you manage...?" he breathed, whispering as he remembered he stood in the middle of a Cylon security block.

"We can talk later," she promised, laughing as she pulled back from his arms and caught her breath. "First, we've got to get to Apollo! Baltar has him!"

He sobered immediately. "Any idea where he is? Or how we can get to him without getting ourselves recaptured or killed?" If there was sarcasm in his thoughts, he hid it well. He himself had serious doubts about their ability to escape the situation -- stuck in the middle of a basestar! -- despite her having done a nearly impossible deed in freeing him.

"Starbuck, you've been on a basestar before, when you and Apollo blew up that one that was following the Fleet?"

"Yes, of course!" he replied, his face lighting up. "We'll need explosives, but I know where to go, where to set solenite bombs... I could rig up a timer..."

"How well? Could you arrange for a series of explosions? A little one for a diversion, then another a few centons later to take out the ship?"

"No problem. That would give us time to get to Apollo -- and maybe Baltar as well!" he finished darkly. "Oh, I'm sorry, Marisoo. I forgot, he's your father..."

"He *may* be," she replied bleakly. "All I remember is the name, no face. Do what you have to with the explosives, Starbuck -- there should be plenty in the shuttle. I'm going after Apollo. He's

with Baltar, and I have to face that man alone."

"You're crazy!" Starbuck snorted.

"No. If he really is my father...I have to face him. Set the explosives, and wait for us at the shuttle. I'll try to reach Apollo. But if we don't make it, at least you get clear. Promise me, Starbuck?"

There was something sad and anxious in her wide blue eyes; he couldn't resist her earnest plea -- it implied she cared about him...

"Listen, Cadet," he said firmly. "I'll set the explosives, and I'll even wait at the shuttle while you face Baltar alone, because somebody has to guard our only way out of here. But I'm not leaving without you. Understand? I'll wait for you, if it costs me my life!"

She stared for a moment, then smiled, flinging her arms around his neck. "Thanks, Starbuck. We'll be there, and that's my word! But let's get going. They'll find out you're gone and sound an alert sooner than we'd like."

They took off at a run, relying on Starbuck's previous experiences aboard Cylon basestars to guide them. First, they had to get explosives from the shuttle; then they would separate to reach their goals -- rescuing Apollo, and blowing up the ship.

* * * * *

The one garbed in black and purple leaned back on her couch, the scowl on her face rapidly giving way to fury.

"How much longer?" raged one of the others. "How long must we work, only to see our best efforts ruined by that interfering, juvenile fool?"

"When this mess is disposed of, our task will be more easily completed," the first among them decided in a sinister tone. "It has to be done. And it falls on us to do it. Let's go -- now."

* * * * *

"All you have to do is tell me what I want to know, Apollo, and I promise you this will all be over very shortly." Baltar gloated over his helpless captive, bound to the torture rack. He had enjoyed the last centar playing with Apollo, imagining Adama hearing his son's moans and observing the young Warrior's struggles.

But he hadn't screamed yet; Lucifer assured him that humans were near their breaking point when they began to scream. Apollo would become more talkative then, he was sure.

Another electric charge ran through the metal frame his prisoner was secured to; his body writhed convulsively, but he couldn't escape the pain.

"Where is the Fleet?" Baltar listened closely for an answer.

Apollo drew a deep, shuddering breath, but forced himself to maintain his silence.

"What is the strength of your fighter squadrons? How many Warriors and ships do you have?"

There were tears welling in his eyes as another current of pain coursed through his body; Apollo stifled another moan. He couldn't betray his people!

Baltar stepped away from the rack long enough to pour himself a goblet of something cool and green. His tone was conversational. "You realize this won't change things at all. Sooner or later, you'll tell me what I want to know, both you and Starbuck. Your persistent silence only lengthens and increases my pleasure in the spectacle. And you'll break, in time. So you would actually be lessening my enjoyment by talking now, rather than permitting me to force every word from you.

"But do feel free to continue your silence as long as you can. It makes no difference to the outcome, and I don't mind at all."

Actually, he was beginning to wish Apollo would speak soon. Death was a quick thing, but it was becoming unnerving continuing this interrogation. The Captain moaned and contorted in torment; but when he stared into those eyes, he could see the effort to keep spirit and will intact under the intense physiological attack. It might be some time before Apollo was broken...

And he wanted Adama and the Fleet, much more than he wanted to watch this man suffer. One human was of little real importance, even though he was Adama's son, if the Colonials escaped him again.

"Of course, there's still Starbuck. Even if something goes wrong and you accidentally die before telling me what I want to know, we still have him. Perhaps I ought to let him view your corpse before he takes your place..."

Apollo tried to pull away, refusing to weaken.

"Where is the Fleet?" his tormentor demanded again.

There was still no response.

Baltar turned to the Centurion on duty, hiding his scowl, speaking angrily. "I don't think he's in enough pain, or he'd be eager to talk by now. Do your job better; increase the voltage."

"Uhhh!"

Baltar turned in time to see Apollo arch against the rack, face contorting as he screamed, fingers twisting into claws as he tried to bite back that tortured sound.

For a moment, he felt ill. Despite all the deaths he'd caused, and the many at his own hands, he'd never had to preside over so stubborn a prisoner's interrogation, and it suddenly pained him to see Apollo suffer. But it would soon be over, and the young Warrior could die...

He bent over his victim. "Are you prepared to talk? You can end the pain with a word," he whispered. "Just tell me what I want to know..."

Apollo was sobbing, biting his lip as he shook his head violently. "Nothing!" he gasped. "I've got nothing to say to you!"

But his voice held uncertainty. Baltar rejoiced; he could see in his prisoner's eyes that he could endure little more of this.

"It's over now!" a clear, angry voice rang out behind him.

Baltar heard laser fire, and turned to see a furious blonde woman standing in the doorway of the interrogation chamber. She had already blasted his two guards, and her weapon was trained unwaveringly on him.

"Turn that machine off!" she ordered, cold steel in her voice. "And if you try anything, you won't ever leave this room alive again!"

He stared open-mouthed. *Who is this girl? How did she get here?*

"I won't tell you again, Baltar."

He thought he heard the beginning of tears in her voice, but saw that she meant what she said.

Apollo strained against another jolt of pain, but managed to laugh at hearing her voice. "I've still got nothing to say to you, Baltar," he whispered. "You haven't won yet!"

Baltar couldn't hear that faint voice. He moved cautiously to the control console, where one of his guards lay in pieces. He flipped the master switch, ending the Warrior's torment.

"Now, free Captain Apollo!" the woman ordered.

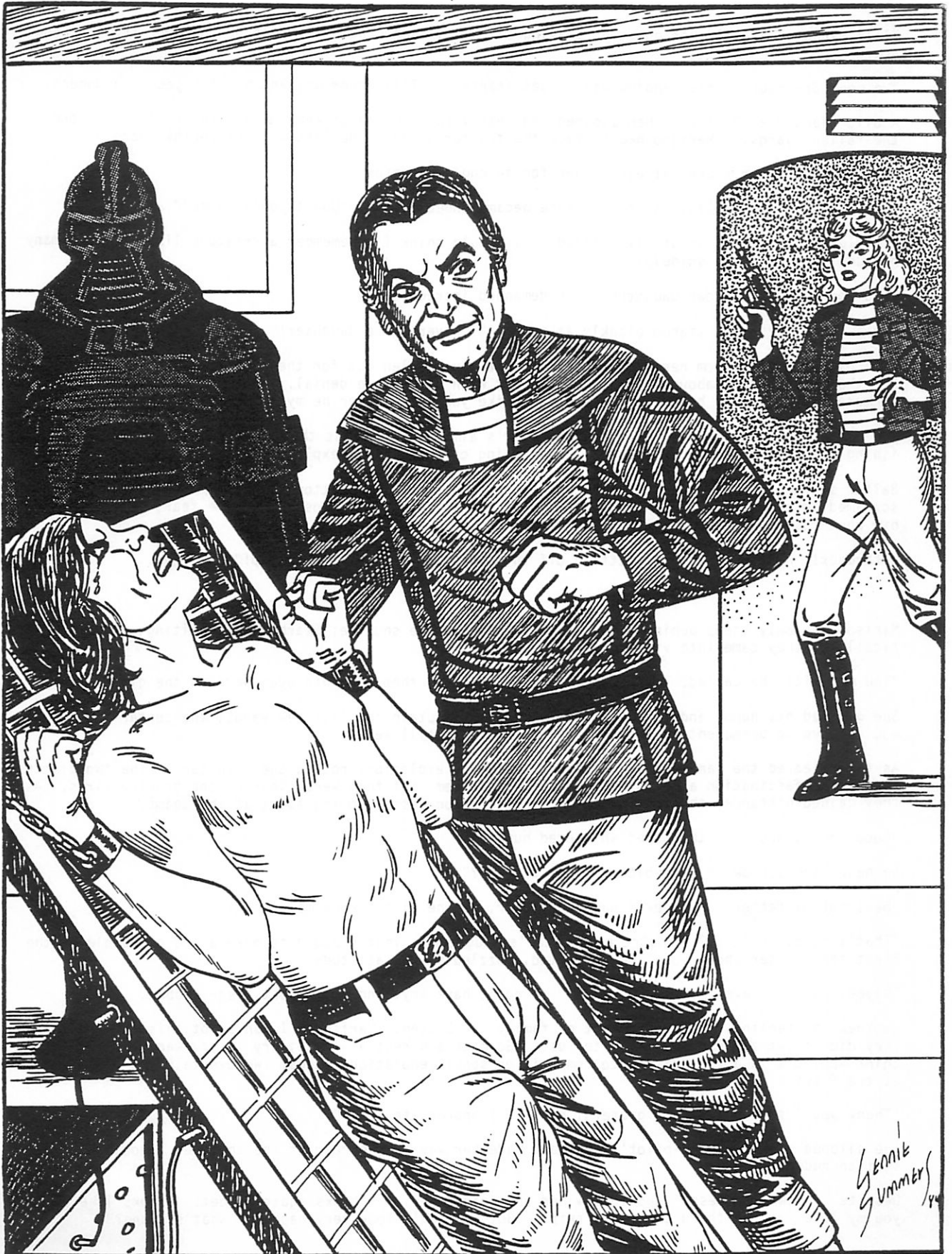
"Of course, my charming guest." What choice did he have? He loosened the shackles at the man's ankles and wrists.

"I don't know who your Amazon lady is," the traitor blustered, "but it won't be long before she is properly dealt with -- and you returned here."

As sensitive and adept at reading people as Marisoo was, she knew his words held cowardice, and ignored them as idle threats.

Apollo was in no condition to respond. He lay still for a moment, enjoying painless breathing, before pulling himself to his feet and staggering away from Baltar's reach.

"Can you walk, Captain?"



"I'll manage," he told her quietly, swaying slightly, then bracing himself on the door frame. "What now?"

"We meet Starbuck in the landing bay. Get started. I'll cover us, and be with you in a moment."

Apollo glanced at Baltar, then stooped and nearly fell as he picked up a laser rifle from one of the fallen guards. Marisoo had to face the traitor alone. He left without another word.

Marisoo and Baltar stared at each other for an endless centon.

"Well?" she cried at last, as the silence became unbearable. "Don't you know me?"

"Should I?" he asked, genuinely puzzled. "I should think I'd remember a creature like you, for many reasons," he finished snidely.

"You don't know your own daughter?" she demanded incredulously.

"My...daughter?" He stared blankly at her. "I never had a daughter!"

The colour drained from her face, and she might have fallen but for the wall behind her. Everything she thought she knew about her past fell apart with his simple denial. "I should have known," she murmured. "I should have realized someone like you could never be my father!"

She had to do something. Shifting the laser's aim, she fired at the torture device, bitterly relishing the awesome shower of sparks and sizzling circuits as it exploded. Then she bolted.

Baltar stared for a moment, forgetting even to hit an alarm button, until fire klaxons suddenly screamed into life; the ship shuddered beneath him. His frozen posture became fear; it occurred to him what must have happened.

"Starbuck!" he cursed. "I'm getting off this ship -- before it blows up!" He ran.

* * * * *

Marisoo was only steps behind Apollo as they reached the shuttle; Starbuck was waiting, waving frantically as they came into view.

"You made it!" he called. His words were for both of them, but his eyes were on the girl.

She grabbed his hand, and together they helped the Captain the last few yards; the center of torture would leave no permanent physical marks, but he was still weak.

As they cleared the landing bay, a second series of explosions rocked the basestar. The two pilots watched in fascination as bits of ship flew past them, but they were clear of the growing fires. As they gained distance, they could see the entire Cylon vessel coming apart at the seams.

"Good job, Starbuck," the Cadet whispered huskily.

He heard the sorrow in her voice. "How'd it go?"

"He's not my father. He never had a daughter, and he didn't know me."

"That's good, isn't it? You're not Baltar's daughter. That's bound to make a lot of people in the Fleet feel better about you," he commented, puzzled by her attitude.

"Maybe, but it leaves me with nothing. I don't have anything for a past," she sobbed.

He knew the feeling, having no past or family. "Listen, Marisoo, I can pilot this thing myself. They didn't get any Raiders off after us. Go back and rest a little; cry if you want to. I don't think Apollo's in any condition to complain or spout regulations at us. We can talk when we're back at the Fleet."

"Thank you," she said with a grateful nod. "I appreciate it..."

She slipped out of the co-pilot's seat and made her way to the rear of the shuttle, choosing a back seat to huddle into.

Despite his own weakness, Apollo saw her and joined her. "Thanks again, Cadet. Looks like I owe you my life for the third time this trip. But you don't look very happy. What's wrong?"



"I should be happy, I guess. Baltar's not my father. But that leaves me with nothing, Apollo, just a lot of blank pages and nothing to put on them. I don't know who I am, or where I'm from. What am I going to do?" She made little effort to hide her tears. It was too much, to have wondered for so long, and to have the answers slip away like sand through her fingers.

"You always have a home with us, you know that," he said tenderly, holding her hand. "And if you want..."

He held his tongue. Now was no time to talk about the future. She had come to mean so much to him in such a short time; he couldn't risk frightening her now.

"I know, Apollo." She managed a watery smile. "I really am grateful; I appreciate everything you and Starbuck and your father have done for me. I shouldn't be feeling sorry for myself. I know I'll be all right." Her smile was braver and brighter, but she still clung tightly to his hand.

* * * * *

Starbuck piloted them safely back to the GALACTICA. They saw the Security team heading toward them as they disembarked in Alpha Bay, but thought nothing of it until one of the men grabbed the girl's arm in a not-too-gentle grip.

"You're under arrest," the man stated formally, daring her to react.

Several of the other men had expectant eyes on Captain Apollo and Lieutenant Starbuck; their hands rested lightly on their weapons as they waited for a response.

The Warriors stared in shock. "What are you doing?" the Captain demanded.

Several of the Security guards seized his arms -- eagerly, he thought; he saw Starbuck wrench free of another man, turning to him in confusion. Lords, they'd just gotten free of one captivity, and not easily. What was going on here?

"Cadet Marisoo," the leader of the squad repeated formally, "you are under arrest, under suspicion of being a Cylon agent. Captain, Lieutenant, you are both to be placed in quarantine. Do not force us to use violence; we are acting under Commander Adama's orders." The man's voice challenged them to resist.

The Warriors stared helplessly at one another as the Security men hurried them to decontamination prior to imprisonment.

(To be concluded.)



"Heroes"

(By Mary Robertson)



They're heroes, these men, these hardened men
With haunted eyes and troubled souls.
They've watched friends die, consumed by flame,
And learned that hatred has a name.
But never will they yield their taut controls.

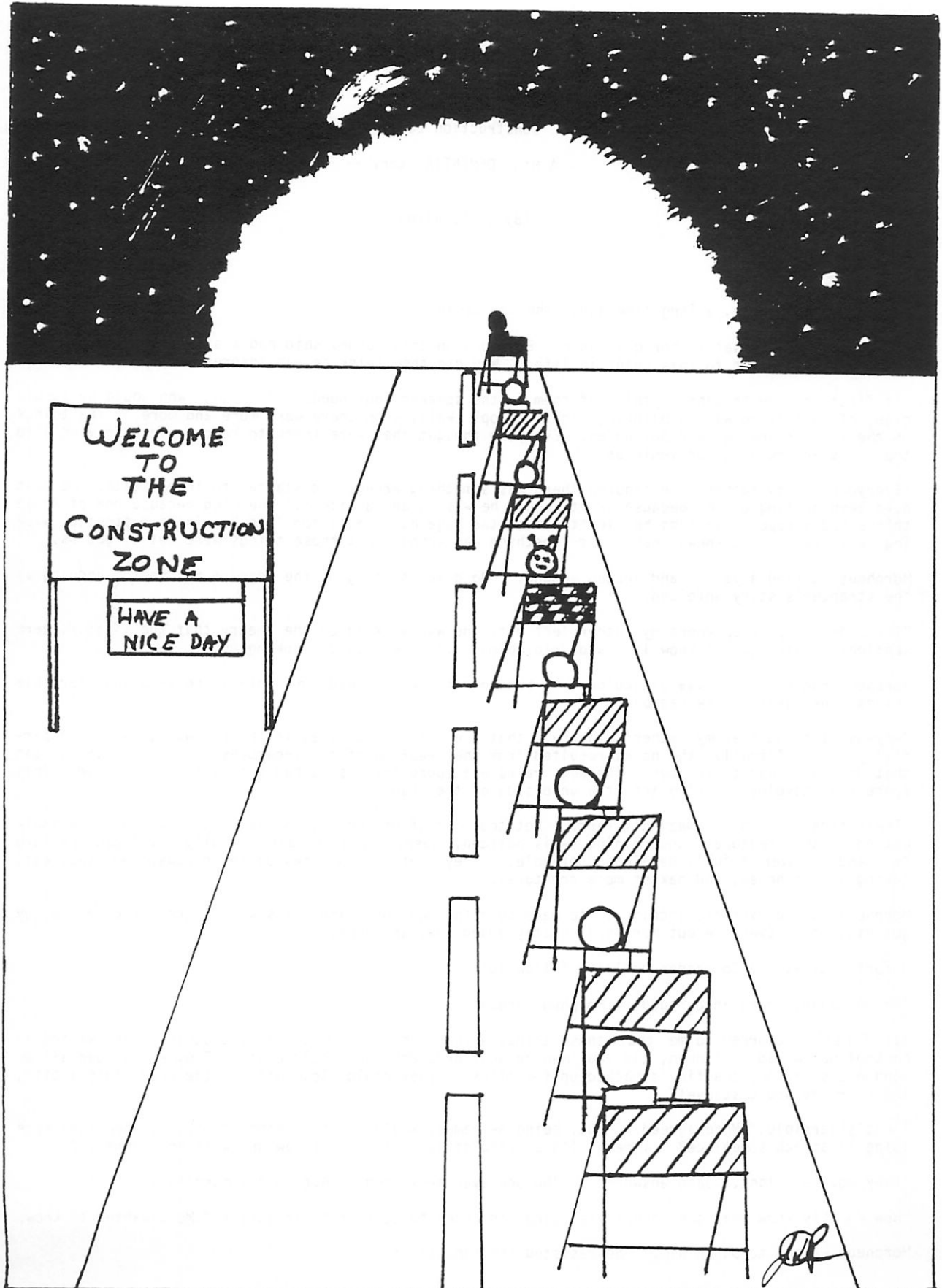


They're heroes, these men, these gentle men
Who walk the ways of destiny.
They've felt deception's chill embrace,
And met illusion face to face,
Within the tides that sweep the ebon sea.



They're heroes, these men, these solemn men
Who silently acknowledge fame
As no more than the needful guise
Of those who see through wisdom's eyes.
For such as they, a hero's just a name.





"Construction Zone"

-- A Mini-DEMENTIA Story --

(By J. D. Rich)

"They came in winter, a long time ago," the man began.

Commander Morpheus sat in bored silence. Everyone on this looney ship had a story to tell about how he or she had gotten to this point in life. Why did they think he was interested?

"At first, no one thought anything of them," the speaker continued. "I mean, who would be suspicious of an A-frame with a blinking light on top? Well, soon there were more and more of the things on the road, standing over pot-holes. Everyone thought they were there to keep us from driving into the holes and ruining our vehicles.

"Everyone but my father. He figured there was something wrong, and started to investigate. He must have been getting close, because pretty soon, he was in an 'accident.' He died because one of those things had stopped blinking; he didn't notice the huge hole until too late." The man stopped, wiping away tears. "I knew, then, that something was wrong, that those things were out to get us."

Morpheus stifled a yawn, and looked around. Mord was sitting on the edge of his seat, nodding as the stranger's story unfolded.

"I decided to pick up where my father left off. He was working on the theory that the visitors were sentient creatures. I know it sounds ridiculous..." He paused, looking up.

Morpheus nodded -- it *was* ridiculous -- but Mord shook his head in denial; he *knew* what terrible things non-organics were capable of.

"Anyway, I found that my father's theory, that the things ate holes in the roadways, was only partially true. Actually, the holes resulted from the *creation* of the creatures. They have an egg sac that develops near their legs. The eggs release a spore that is washed into the road by rain. This spore then develops, eating into the underside of the road-bed.

"Their final growth is amazingly fast. Not too long after the sag in the road -- which is an indication of the creatures' undermining -- is noticed, seemingly overnight, a fully developed creature is standing over a fully developed pot-hole. They continue to chew up the roadways as they eat, making bigger holes, and making more creatures."

Morpheus looked over his shoulder, to make sure the men in white coats were there in case the guy got violent. Everyone but Mord had quietly edged away and gone.

Unfortunately, the Commander couldn't follow suit.

"Go on, Jahn," Mord encouraged. Morpheus groaned.

"It finally occurred to me that those things weren't there just to cause trouble; they wanted to control our world. I mean, can you imagine what problems they could cause? They eat a road all along one side, and traffic is backed up for miles. They could close off all the roads into a city, and everyone would starve!"

"That's terrible," Mord agreed. "But, being A-frames, wouldn't it be kind of obvious when they were going to attack someplace? I mean, I'd be kind of suspicious if I saw one walking around..."

"They move at night," Jahn answered. "No one ever sees them. But in the morning..."

"How do they know what the others are doing, in order to coordinate an attack?" Mord wanted to know.

Morpheus wanted to punch him. He resisted the temptation.

"Remember the blinking lights? That's how they communicate."

"This is all very interesting," Morpheus lied. "But it doesn't explain what you were doing bobbing around in that spacecraft we found you in."

"A friend and I decided to wage war against the things. You know, get them before they get us. One night, we were kind of drunk, and decided to go hunting. We drove along a road they were encamped on, holding a club out the window of our vehicle, smashing their little blinkers.

"We thought it was great. But the next morning, when I went to see my friend, there was a smoking pit where his house had been. Someone said there'd been an explosion..."

"But those creatures did it, right?" Mord was getting excited.

This time, Morpheus did kick him, in the shins.

"They were standing around the hole, blinking at me," Jahn answered, his eyes beginning to glaze. "I knew they would kill me next. I had to get out of there. So I stole a ship, and just pushed it full throttle until I ran out of fuel. I was almost out of air when you guys found me. I owe you my life..."

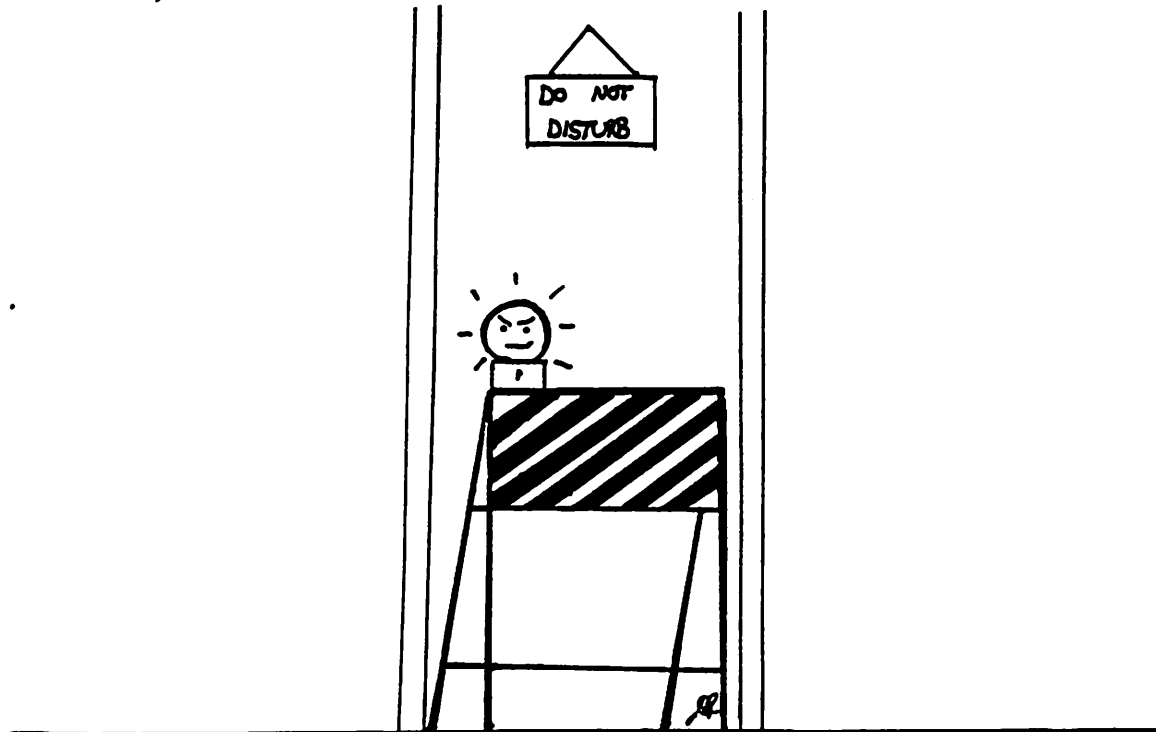
I always did have lousy timing, Morpheus thought miserably. "Well, there's nothing to worry about now," he soothed. "You're safe here. Why don't you go with these nice men, and they'll show you to your room..."

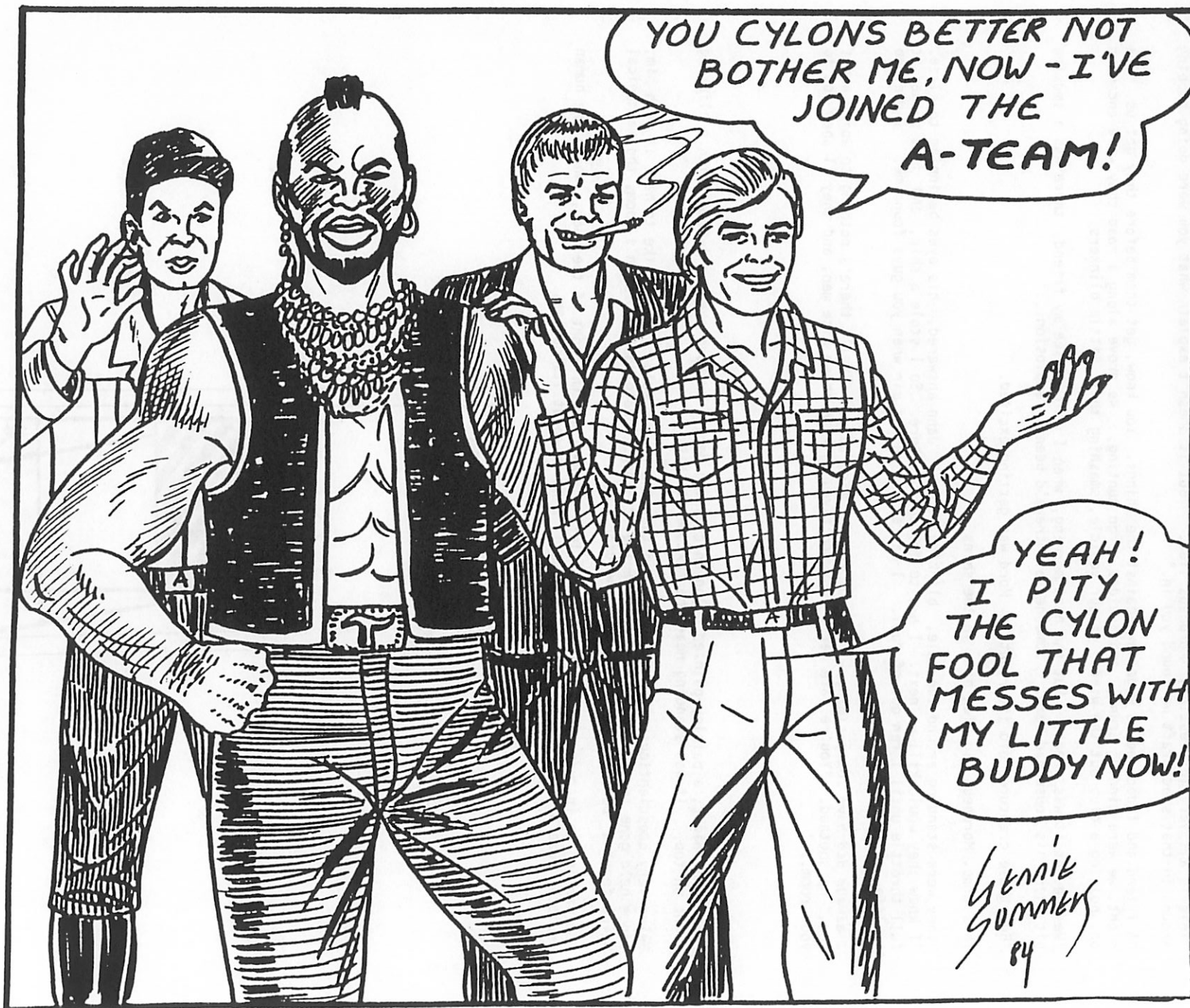
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Later that night, a paisley-painted Cylon on cleaning detail tripped over an A-frame with a blinking light on top. It was standing near the newcomer's ship.

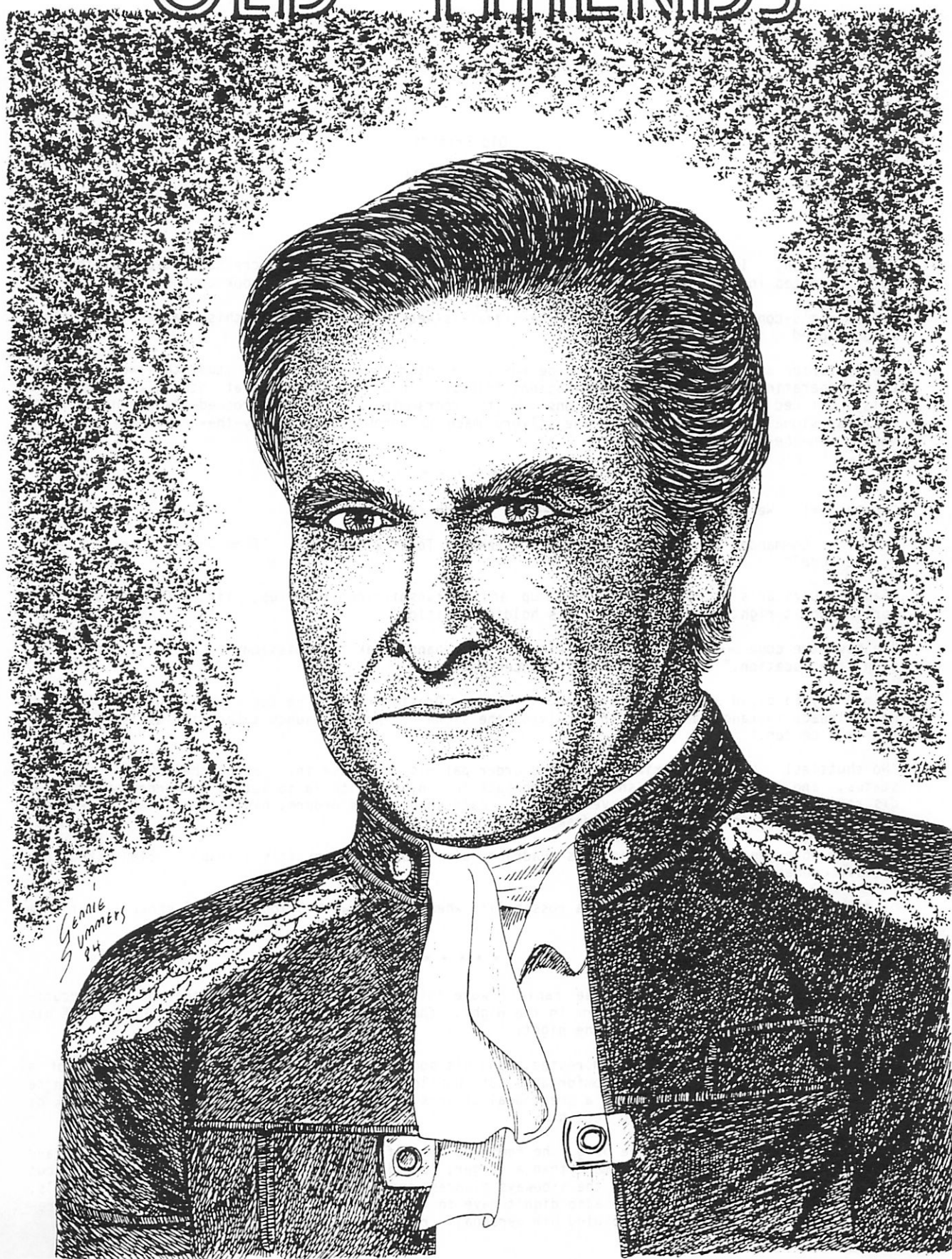
Being very conscientious, the Cylon decided that the human would probably like to have it with him, since he'd gone to all the trouble of bringing it along. Dragging it to Jahn's room, the mechanical being found a "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door.

Not wanting to intrude, the Cylon quietly left the A-frame in front of the door, where the human would be sure not to miss it. Then it happily went on about its duties.





OLD FRIENDS



"Old Friends"

(By Lee Gaul)

"Confirmation. It-is-a-distress-signal-in-one-of-our-codes," the metal creature at one of the consoles reported in a monotone after several centons of mechanical, by-the-book computations.

"This-unit's-conclusion-is-the-same. The-signal-is-weak-but-very-near-in-this-quadrant," a second Cylon droned.

The Centurion serving as commander of the small freighter convoy seemed to study the two lesser machines operating the scan and communications boards. Actually, it stared at nothing while computer relays clicked to the proper reactions in its programming. "We-will-proceed-to-respond-to-this-distress-signal-and-investigate," the silvery machine announced. "Relay-the-orders-to-the-other-vessels-in-the-convoy."

* * * * *

"Commander! We're picking up signals -- in a Cylon code!"

"What?" Commander Cain moved instantly to stand at Tolan's shoulder. "From where? Can we identify the code?"

"Captain Daystar's patrol is picking it up and retransmitting it to us, sir. Communications is working on it right now. The patrol is holding position..."

"We have the code -- it's a distress signal! Low band, weak transmission -- we're trying to pinpoint the location." Tolan frowned in concentration.

"Sir!" Lygia piped up from her station. "Captain Orestes reports he can fly back-up for Daystar. He's already in range and is also receiving the signal. We can launch a Security assistance shuttle in a centon."

"No shuttles! Launch a strike wing, and order patrols to close in. Bring the PEGASUS to alert status, and inform the other ships to drop back in convoy, with Pa to act as commander at his own discretion. We'll move in to investigate." Cain snapped his orders, his eyes still fastened narrowly on the screen at his command desk.

"There's no evidence of Cylons in this quadrant, sir. Do you think it's a trap?" Tolan asked, obviously concerned.

"I doubt it, but treachery's always a possibility when dealing with Cylons. We'll check it out from a position of strength."

* * * * *

Baltar's love for his planet of exile rapidly wore thin after the first two sections of its mercurial weather. There was another storm in the night; the wind, thunder, and hail bouncing off his small shelter kept him awake half the night.

When the sun rose, he was far from rested, and his body felt bruised and sore, the results of a combination of sleeping on an uncomfortable cot and long days of hard physical labour to which he was highly unaccustomed. It took a great deal of work to sustain himself with the humble stack of supplies and equipment Adama had left him.

But at least he was free of the brig, he reminded himself as he crawled from his narrow bunk and dressed. This might be nothing more than a larger, lonelier prison, with required hard labour, but he was no longer forced to endure the sideways glances and unveiled hatred of his fellow Colonials, who knew he'd betrayed them. He also didn't have to face Warriors and Security men everywhere, reminding him of his status, and holding him personally responsible for their own woes.

And with the transmitter Adama had foolishly left him, he at least had hope...

And he could still dream. As he gobbled a breakfast of native fruits and hard nuts, washed down with spring water, he indulged himself in his favourite fantasy. He dreamt himself truly free, rescued by his Cylon allies -- untrustworthy though they might be -- and back in charge of a fleet of base stars. The Colonial Fleet was his, only tattered remnants surviving his attacks, its captains begging him for mercy... Then, a crowning joy -- Adama himself coming under truce-sign to plead for his people, and being treated exactly as he had treated Baltar -- a prison cage, and public display before his foes; and Apollo and Starbuck, captured alive, brought before him and thrown to their knees, begging him for their lives while he mocked them and ordered their deaths -- slowly, under torture, before Adama's horrified gaze...

Baltar scowled. Yes, he'd love to hear them plead and scream, but they'd never beg him for the time of day, especially after the way he'd taunted Apollo at Starbuck's murder trial. And then he'd been forced to save them both in order to save himself... It wasn't fair!

Not only that, but after only two sections, even his brightest dreams of revenge paled before the prospect of another long, hard day.

"Spoilt a perfectly wasted twenty centons," he commented to himself with a growl. The sound of his own voice unnerved him in the quiet shelter. There were only the hum of the small generator, and small bird noises from outside, and he momentarily regretted breaking his silence; then he forced himself to continue speaking, remembering the planet was truly his to do with as he could.

"I've been here two sections. I should've been rescued by now," he scolded the room. "I'm beginning to hate this planet even more than I hate Adama and Apollo!"

The solar generator, for reasons of its own, chose that moment to die. Its comforting hum grew silent; the small light in the shelter flickered; and Baltar found himself sitting in dead silence amidst the morning shadows. For a moment, fear clutched heavily at his chest, then he chuckled sarcastically.

"Why not? I'm not too fond of you, either, generator. But since I need you to keep my transmitter sending, I'll take a look at you and hopefully find out what's wrong. Probably just not enough sun. There's been so much rain recently..."

Still grumbling, he crossed the floor, pulled open the door of the shelter, and stepped out, squinting in the glare of the brilliant early morning sun. He heard bird calls that suggested they were startled or disturbed by something. Fortunately, there were no large predators making this area their habitat. He wondered briefly what was bothering the birds, but they didn't concern him overly much, and he promptly forgot about them.

The solar panels of his generator glistened with dew or rain left from the night, but they were still tracking in the proper position. A closer check showed that one of the cables was loose, probably blown free in the wind. A moment with a portable welder, and the problem was repaired. Baltar heard the reassuring hum of the generator as it returned to life, and was satisfied.

Coming back around the side of his shelter, he froze, staring. There, against the verdant backdrop of "his" world, stood several people, most of them in the uniforms of Colonial Warriors.

Two of them were female, he realized at once; one was fair, the other dark-haired. Two of the men were also blond; a third was dark-skinned, and the last seemed alien, shorter than the others, gold-skinned, with an unusual hair-style and uniform. For a centon, they all stared back at him with equal intensity.

The gorgeous blonde woman stepped forward, half-smiling as she studied him, then turned to one of the blond men. Baltar's eyes grew wider as he saw the winged-sword patch of the battlestar PEGASUS.

"Inform Commander Cain we have located the originator of the Cylon distress signal," she ordered calmly.

"Right away, Major." The young man nodded, and vanished into the fern-like greenery.

Baltar ran for the door of his shelter, knowing he had a weapon hanging next to his cot, cursing that he'd gone outside without it, to be caught weaponless by these people. He'd gone a half-dozen steps when one of the Warriors tackled him into the grass, twisting his arms behind him before allowing him to rise again. The former man of influence in the Colonies stared dismally and with some dread at his captors -- Warriors from the ship of the man who was quite possibly his worst enemy.

* * * * *

Cain, apparently engrossed in the supply statistics Graham had sent him, waited several centons before deigning to notice his prisoner. The technician who'd brought them -- a Delphian woman -- waited passively behind him, while the Warriors who guarded the manacled prisoner also were quiet but alert. It wasn't long before Baltar began to fidget.

At that point, Cain finally set aside his comp-sheets and lounged back in his chair, studying his captive. "So, Baltar," the Commander began, "we finally meet again. It's been a long time since Molukai."

"Why, whatever are you talking about?" Baltar faltered, hearing the sharp, bitter pleasure in the other man's voice. *He can't possibly be referring to... No, he couldn't know... But then again, at Gamoray, he was willing to sacrifice everything to reach a certain Cylon base star, my base star.* He broke into a cold sweat, and could feel himself trembling.

Cain's narrow, searching gaze caught his body's betrayal; satisfaction lay in the cold, steel-blue eyes. "Yes, Baltar," he grated through clenched teeth. "I know how you betrayed us at Molukai, with your bombs and your trap. I remember how many died there. And we learned, too, from Adama, how you even turned against the entire Twelve Tribes, and handed all of humanity over to those Cylon butchers, for your own gain. But I'll bet even you didn't realize how thoroughly they planned to exterminate us."

Baltar's knees were knocking; he knew he was doomed, and grabbed at the most slender hope. "The Cylons betrayed me, too, Cain. I tried to preserve my world, when I saw what was happening. And it was Karibdis, not me, who was responsible for Molukai. Adama knew; he had him arrested when they learned he was still alive. Karibdis tried to kill me, and Captain Apollo as well, on the GALACTICA..."

"Shut up!" Cain's voice was a whiplash across his words.

Baltar saw his guards turn pale with a dawning knowledge that quickly turned to hate. They hadn't had all of Cain's information. It suddenly occurred to him that Cain had tricked him into admitting that he knew, at least, what happened at Molukai, and that he probably had a part in it. He should have kept playing the innocent; maybe they'd have believed he was an innocent pawn, caught in the middle...

"You were willing to betray all of us for your own ambition. And you started out with my people! If there was any punishment great enough for what you've done..."

One of the guards was edging closer; it was the black man who'd tackled him on the planet. Baltar tried to step away; one of the other guards restrained him -- the blond man, a grim look on his handsome features. *Why does he remind me of Starbuck?*

"No, Rissian," Cain intervened before anything further could be done. "There's nothing we can do to make up for what he's done. There's no punishment great enough. At Gamoray, I thought just knowing he was dead would be vengeance enough... But then, I never thought we'd have you in custody again, Baltar. You were on the GALACTICA, you say. How'd you get to that planet? Adama get tired of listening to your whining lies?"

Cain's voice was loud in the overly-quiet room. Baltar could feel the hatred directed at him, and was frightened by its intensity. "Adama and I came to an arrangement," he said, trying to brazen it out.

The Commander abruptly turned away from him, and strode to his window-port. The view was lovely -- a lush green world, one of its three satellites glowing brightly with reflected starlight. The star that was sun to the system lay in the opposite direction, a bright golden ball of fire; its brilliance outshone the background, and few other stars could be detected in the velvet blackness around it.

"You made an arrangement. And Adama gave you that world." Cain sounded almost calm, and very thoughtful. "Banishment, alone. Not a bad idea, that..."

Baltar felt a moment of pure relief. Perhaps he wouldn't be subjected to the confines of a prison cell again, after all. Perhaps he could be returned to his world...

Cain turned slowly, and there was a calculating, unpleasant smile on his rough features. "You probably didn't give him much choice about it; he must have wanted something from you very badly. Pity you have no such bargaining chip with me."

He's playing with me, as a bast might play with some small game! Well, I'm not going to take it any more!

"No, I don't," he began boldly, not hearing his voice shake. "But I'm sure I can remember something you want. After all, I *do* know a lot about the Cylons' activities in this quadrant, and was privy to much information you may find useful..."

There was disgust on the Commander's face, and contempt in his words. "So you betray them as quickly as you betrayed us. No, Baltar, I won't be seduced by your words, so you might as well save them."

The dark-skinned Rissian still stood near him, and, from the mad rage barely held in control, Baltar knew he would not live long if he remained on the PEGASUS. There were too many here like Rissian, who hated him. And Cain himself would never take action against any of them if some "accident" were to take a traitor's life.

"You're a Colonial Warrior... You're sworn, all of you," he stuttered in fear. "Whatever happened is past! I can guide you back to the GALACTICA! I have no reason to love the Cylons..."

"And we have none to love you," Cain replied, almost amiably. He was enjoying this; Baltar was reacting precisely as could have been predicted, trying to save his skin by whatever means. "We already know where the GALACTICA is, but we're here for a reason. And *you* are part of that reason. You are quite obviously guilty of your crimes, so there remains only the sentencing..."

"Sentencing? What sentencing? I've received no trial! I protest!"

The Commander continued without pause. "You will be returned to your planet of exile. However, I see no reason to burden you with the responsibilities of concerning yourself with a transmitter. We will retain it," he finished brutally. "Orestes, Rissian, take him away. Electra, prepare a proper honour guard for his escort back."

The hold on his arms was far from gentle. He tried to catch at the doorframe with one manacled hand as they pulled him from Cain's presence. "You can't do this to me! Don't you respect Adama's word? He promised me... Cain, you've got to leave me some hope! Every man deserves that..."

"You've stated yourself guilty. You are sentenced to exile. Get him out of here." Cain could hear the shrieked protests for several centons as the renegade was hauled away. He glanced at Major Electra, the remaining Warrior in the room, and ranking pilot on the PEGASUS. A predatory smile appeared on his face.

"Let the punishment suit the crime," he said softly. "Adama was too gentle with him, but then, Baltar had something Adama must have needed very much. I have no such need; I already know all I need to know about the Cylons."

Electra took a deep breath and settled into a chair. She'd been too tense to sit while the traitor was in the room. "But sending him back to that planet? Isn't that letting him off?"

"He wanted a world to rule; he shall have one, the same one Adama gave him. Why should he ever want to leave it? Prepare a shuttle to take him back to the surface, Major, and take an armed escort. There he stays, now and forever. I am not Adama; I see no reason to leave him hope. Bring back his transmitter."

She nodded, a malicious twist to her smile.

Several moments later, Cain stood, staring out the viewport, wondering if he were doing the right thing in returning Baltar to the planet -- and exile. After so long, his hatred still burned strong for what had happened at Molukai, and later, at the "Peace." Whatever they did to that traitor, it wouldn't return the dead to life, or undo the terrible Destruction, and those thoughts wearied him, depressed him. There was nothing that could change the past.

But Baltar alive and alone on a world would have to endure each moment of exile without help or hope for the rest of his life; maybe those long moments of banishment would force him to feel the emptiness the survivors did. The almost infinite series of microns between now and the man's death would perhaps drive him to insanity -- but hopefully, not too soon. A moment of loneliness and hopelessness for every drop of blood he was responsible for -- maybe *that* would affect him, for the Lords knew his shallow betrayals had made no impression on his callous heart.

He'd never liked Baltar, and knew the other man had never liked him, but even revenge meant nothing now; it was empty, somehow. Baltar was punished, but was still unbeaten -- Adama had sent him here; it was no military defeat. That, to Cain, made a world of difference.

Baltar had been on the GALACTICA. For a moment, he debated asking about Sheba and Cassiopeia, if the traitor had known them -- but he knew he wouldn't ask. He wouldn't give Baltar the satisfac-

tion, wouldn't let the man think he had a bargaining point. Besides, if Sheba were dead now, after the sectars apart, after unknown battles, he didn't want to know. Better to think of her as alive and well and happy. Better to think of them both that way...

* * * * *

"Can such a lovely lady truly be so cruel as to leave a man alone and stranded with no hope at all?" Baltar cajoled the pilot of his shuttle. His arms were manacled behind him; two guards sat beside him; another Warrior sat next to the Major. She was the one he had to reach; she was the ranking pilot. *She's the one in charge...*

Electra ignored his pleas as she concentrated on flying the small craft. Captain Tokyo and Captain Orestes led patrol wings on either side of her; Baltar was getting a royal send-off for his last contact with the humanity he had betrayed.

"Coming up on our original landing site, within a mile of Baltar's camp. Do we set down there?" murmured Trent from alongside her. The Sergeant refused to so much as acknowledge Baltar's presence; he still carried several scars from the battle of Molukai, although the worst had been surgically corrected.

"Sounds good," she replied without hesitation. They *could* have dropped their prisoner off miles from his camp, to let him find his own way back, if he survived -- but for some reason, Cain wanted him to live, so they would give him every chance for a long life. *Not that he deserves it...*

The shuttle skimmed treetops for several microns, then dropped lower to the grasses of a river plain. Vipers settled neatly on either side. They were down.

Electra swivelled in her seat as Rissian and Ptah yanked Baltar to his feet. "Well, Count," she began calmly, "we'll escort you back to your camp, to make sure you get there, and then we'll pick up your transmitter and leave you in peace. Of course, we'll have to drain your weapon first. By the time you get it recharged on that old generator of yours, we'll be back in the skies. I trust you understand the reasoning behind that particular precaution of ours."

Baltar almost snarled at her formal expression and elegant tones -- as if this were small talk at a party! *But at least they're leaving me a working weapon. Cain might've taken that from me, too. But if a day of reckoning ever comes, he'll pay for this slight. Yes, and this charming beauty won't look so pleased then, either!*

Outside the shuttle, his "honour guard" clustered around him, waiting for orders. The Major gave them quickly. "Orestes, you and Astarte keep guard on our ships. Tokyo, you and Saigan take the lead. Rissian and Ptah will continue as your immediate escorts, Count Baltar, as they did so well on the shuttle, while Trent and I will bring up the rear. We'll remove your manacles at the campsite. Captain Tokyo, lead out."

How she could smile so sweetly while insulting him, he didn't know, but he was glad he wouldn't have to endure much more of her so-called politeness.

The two Delphian warriors, who had no particular immediate hatred for their prisoner, bestowed curious glances on the Colonial betrayer, then turned to the deep forest, following the trail Major Electra's party had made earlier that day in finding the traitor.

One look at his captors, and Baltar knew he could expect no mercy from any of them, or much consideration -- but, at least, he could expect to live.

For just a micron, he was face to face with the leader of his escort. "Pray you're never at my mercy, Major -- for I will have none for you," he snarled under his breath.

She obviously heard him, but made no response.

* * * * *

"There-is-a-Colonial-vessel-in-orbit-above-the-planet," one of the Cylons reported to its superior. "We-are-remaining-opposite-its-projected-path-and-the-remainder-of-this-convoy-is-sheltering-behind-the-sun. What-orders-shall-be-given-to-the-landing-party?"

"Have-them-continue-to-scout-the-discovered-camp," the senior Cylon ordered in its monotone. "Have-them-take-prisoner-anyone-they-discover-there-and-keep-them-alive-until-they-receive-further-orders. We-must-discover-more-about-the-Colonial-force-we-face-before-further-action-is-taken."

"By-your-command."

* * * * *

"It's been a long time since I was on a planet."

Orestes glanced up at the wistful quality in Astarte's voice. She was strolling near the edge of the clearing, away from the slow-moving river. Her arms were full of the red blossoms that bloomed among the grasses at her feet. She seemed to be weaving something with them, braiding them together in some intricate fashion.

"Yeah," he replied thoughtfully. "The PEGASUS gets most of her supplies and raw materials by raiding Cylons, so there's not much call for us to go planetside. Maybe, when we get a little farther away from the Empire, we'll be able to take the time. I wonder if we'll be with the GALACTICA then..." He was sitting on the nose of his Viper, that being the best vantage point short of climbing a tree.

He watched as Astarte finished whatever she was doing. "There," she suddenly announced grandly, raising a twisted red and green wreath in her arms. "I hereby name myself queen of this world." With a small flourish, she crowned herself with the flowers.

Orestes laughed, but had to admit she looked very nice with the red flowers set in her dark hair. "Bravo, your majesty," he called, clapping lightly in an affected manner, with an almost simpering quality in his voice.

She made a face at him. "And to think," she scolded, "I considered naming you my prince consort."

"Oh? And how should a prince consort behave?" the Captain inquired gravely of the Sergeant, a gleam in his eyes.

"In the first place, you should come down off there and show some respect for your queen!" she replied, throwing an extra flower at him.

"How about if I be your chief guard, and stay up here? We're supposed to be keeping an eye on our ships..."

"Where are they going?"

"That's not the point..."

"All right, I understand. Even here, we have to be on guard." She threw up her hands in surrender, and sighed. "It's just that it's been so long..."

"If you want to take a walk, I can stay here," he offered.

She shook her head, still looking unhappy. He slid off the ship's nose and waded through the grass to her side. She slumped against a tree trunk, all her previous playfulness gone.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine."

He reached out a hand and touched her flower coronet. "I never got the hang of these when I was little. They always fell apart, or lost their petals and looked hideous. Think you could make me one, your majesty?"

She looked up at him through her dark eyelashes. A small smile tugged at her lips. "I could try, my prince." As she turned to go back to her flower-picking, he blocked her passage on both sides, planting his palms against the tree. She looked up inquiringly.

"It ~~has~~ been a long time," he whispered. He lowered his head and touched his lips to hers. She responded with a murmur, running her hands up his back and pulling him closer.

After a long moment, they both broke away. The sweet scent of the flowers was heady in his nostrils as Orestes sighed. "I think some things need the life of a growing world to keep them growing," he said, a touch of wonder in his voice.

"Yes," she breathed. "And this is such a lovely world... I'd better get some more flowers to weave..." She slipped free of his arms, but kept looking back at him.

He wondered if he'd done the right thing, kissing her. They'd had a brief love affair before he became her squadron commander. He made it his policy not to get involved with the women in his own



squadron -- there were plenty of others interested in him, after all! -- but it looked like there was still a flame there, just waiting for the right stimulus. And this world was, if nothing else, guaranteed to encourage just such thoughts...

He shook himself mentally. Then he heard her scream.

Orestes spun around, pulling his laser free in a lightning move, but it was already too late. He had a brief glimpse of Astarte in another embrace -- a Cylon's -- before the world went dark.

* * * * *

The trip through the woods was uneventful. Baltar finally subsided into cold silence -- no doubt his version of a dignified exit, Electra thought as they reached the campsite. Baltar's shelter stood exactly as they had left it; the door was even still ajar.

"Well, Count Baltar, this seems to be where we leave you," she commented to the man as Lieutenant Rissian removed his manacles. Ptah claimed the weapon from the shelter, and industriously drained its charge into the ground.

The traitor fixed her with a haughty stare. His clothing was somewhat stained from several tumbles into the vegetation, and his face was scratched, but he'd gained no humility from it. She let herself grin as she rather insolently glanced at his clothes. "I suggest you start with a bath and some laundry."

A shade of red mottled his complexion, but he said nothing.

Perhaps he feared a violent reaction from the man standing behind him. Rissian had watched him closely during the trip; more than once, Baltar was sure, a tumble he took had been the result of a push from the dark-skinned man. The Lieutenant's hatred radiated directly at him.

Captain Tokyo had been looking around. He seemed to listen for a moment, then suddenly grabbed Electra's wrist in a grip of steel. "Listen!" he hissed.

The entire party fell silent. "What is it?" the Major asked after a strained moment. It had been so long since she'd been on a living planet that she wasn't sure what she should be listening for.

"The birds... Something's wrong here..." The short Delphian glanced at the ground, moving slowly. Then he stiffened, and bent closer to the dirt.

"A Cylon footprint," he announced grimly.

There was an audible intake of breath from half a dozen throats, then a sliding sound as five Warriors drew lasers, suddenly fearful of the dark, silent woods around them.

They stood motionless and silent for a long centon. "Think they're still here?" Trent whispered to Electra.

She turned her gaze back to Tokyo, who was still studying the ground. He shrugged; there was no worry on his face, but that in itself meant nothing.

"Spread out," the woman ordered in a low voice. "Get under cover, and check out the area. If you find anything..."

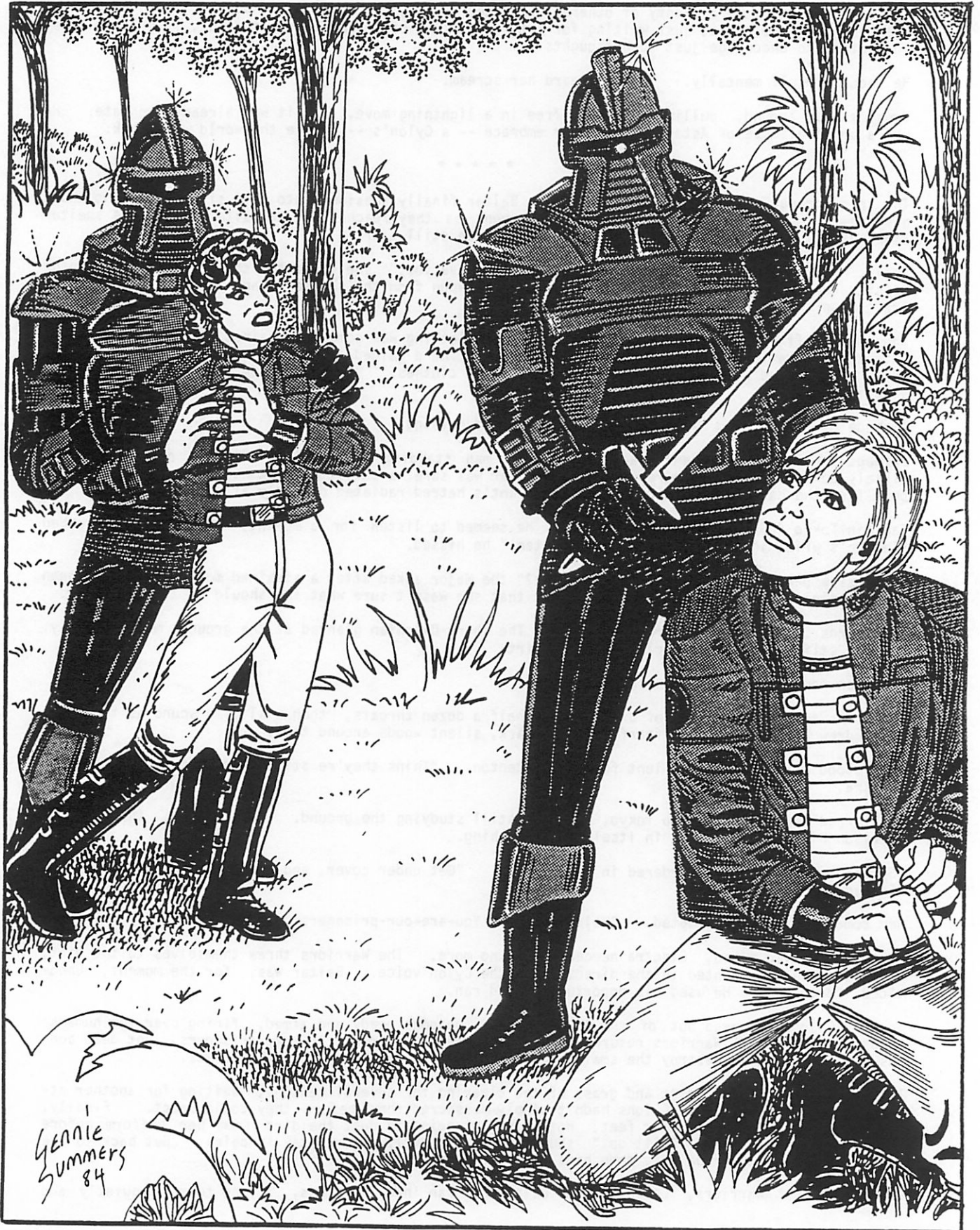
Her commands were interrupted. "Halt-humans. You-are-our-prisoners."

At that metallic sound, Electra needed to say no more. The Warriors threw themselves to the dirt, weapons drawn and pointed in the direction of the Cylon voice. Baltar was, for the moment, unnoticed, forgotten. He used his opportunity, and ran.

Several Cylons appeared out of the lush foliage, weapons ready and aimed, firing over the humans' heads. The PEGASUS Warriors returned fire; unhampered by orders to take prisoners, not dead bodies, they managed to destroy the small enemy squad with no casualties to themselves.

They stayed low in the dirt and grass of the clearing for several centons, waiting for another attack, surprised that the Cylons hadn't simply massacred them before they could react. Finally, Electra hauled herself to her feet, not even bothering to dust the dirt from her uniform before turning to her people. "Split up," she commanded urgently, "but stay in pairs. Get back to the ships! Watch out for Baltar, damn him! He ran! Be careful..."

Three pairs of Warriors, Colonial and Delphian, ran into the woods, trying to move quietly and



quickly, to get back to their fellows and their ships before Baltar could link up with the enemy and give away their position -- and inform the Cylons they were from the PEGASUS, and betray her location...

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Baltar rushed wildly through thick stands of trees and tall grasses, not caring how much noise he made. He was away from the humans, and he had to find his Cylon allies, and hope they didn't shoot him down before identifying him. If he could reach them, he was saved...

"Halt-human. We-do-not-wish-to-destroy-you."

The man froze in his tracks, but smiled as a pair of Cylons appeared before him from somewhere in the dense greenery. "Greetings, my friends," he began effusively.

"You-are-our-prisoner."

"I am no one's prisoner. I am Commander Baltar. Take me to your superior. I am assuming command of your operations."

"By-your-command."

* * * * *

Three Colonials and two Delphians crouched in the tropical jungle undergrowth bordering a small natural clearing along the river. They anxiously watched that clearing, where five Colonial vessels -- one shuttle and four Vipers -- stood deserted; the wait seemed interminable. After long moments, a rustling in the weeds betrayed the return of another Colonial Warrior, a broad-shouldered, dark-haired young man. He crept very close before rising to his knees to give his report to his superior officer.

"They're not here." Trent's somber statement only confirmed what they all dreaded. Captain Orestes and Sergeant Astarte were no longer at the landing site. The ships appeared undamaged, from their viewing distance, but the human guards had disappeared. Sergeant Trent had volunteered to sneak closer to the vessels and check them out; the resulting knowledge was not exactly welcome.

"Any evidence as to what happened to them?" Electra whispered. Her quiet tone was both to keep their conversation from carrying to anyone who might be looking for them, and to hide her fear for her brother. The Cylons had no reputation for kindness to humans, and if they were responsible for the absence of Orestes and Astarte...

The young Warrior took a deep breath. "There're some marks of a struggle on the far side of the clearing, near the river. Also -- and you're not going to like this, Major -- the Cylons were definitely here. I didn't look into our ships, didn't want to put my flesh where it might draw attention, but they look okay."

The Major glanced at the other members of her small force. "Comments?"

Captain Tokyo, an experienced Delphian pilot, spoke up first. "Possibly meant to be a trap, Major. The Cylons probably took the others prisoner, since there is no blood or evidence of laser fire, and they are now watching the clearing. If they merely did not want us going anywhere, they would have sabotaged our ships."

Electra had to agree with his astute analysis; it concurred with her own ideas, and she knew Tokyo was an excellent strategist. "They wanted us alive at Baltar's camp, and they probably want us alive here, too. I wonder why... Unless they were sent to rescue Baltar, and need us alive for some reason..."

"For questioning?" Trent ventured. "Maybe they think we're from the GALACTICA..."

"If they've got any of our people, they already know better than that," the Major replied grimly. "And if Baltar's with the Cylons..."

"...our people won't live long," Rissian finished darkly. "Baltar's got no reason to like any of us, and the only thing the Cylons'll do is suggest new and different ways of killing them -- and us, if we're caught. Probably publicly. Then they'll go for the PEGASUS -- and the Delphians, if Baltar knows or figures out we've got survivors from the Empire travelling with us."

Electra had a bad taste in her mouth.

"What do we do next, Major?" Tokyo asked.

Delphian male warriors didn't appeal to females for advice on anything. She was being tested again -- damn him, with lives at stake! -- but that seemed to be the man's nature. She'd have to think of something, and fast. Her brother's life might depend on it.

"Everybody feel up to following a Cylon trail?" she asked them all.

"Cylons don't leave trails -- they leave highways with 'follow us' written all over them!" Rissian spat. "We can follow them."

"Then let's see where they went, and what we can learn by following and listening," she said with determination. "They've probably got guards posted, so be careful."

"Any Cylons we spot will soon be dead Cylons!" Tokyo declared. Saigan, his wingmate, concurred with a simple nod.

Satisfied, Electra led her small party in a roundabout path to circle the clearing.

* * * * *

Baltar stared about in dismay. *This is my grand rescue force? This is what that Cylon commander sent to find me?*

Some dozen Cylons stood in guard positions around their small shuttle -- and only another dozen had been part of the search team. Four of those lay in pieces in the jungle around his own camp, destroyed in the attempt to capture Major Electra's "honour guard." *I'd've given different orders where she's concerned. "Capture," indeed!*

He'd hoped for a force great enough to take on and eliminate the PEGASUS, a coup that would restore his reputation in the Cylon Empire, and still any questions as to his loyalty to the Imperious Leader -- for the time being. It would also have been a pleasant revenge against the man who'd cost him the GALACTICA at Gamoray.

Instead, all he had were a few freighters, and a handful of Raiders -- and he still had to get safely into space, which would be difficult with Cain in orbit above. No, things still looked bleak...

"By-your-command."

"What is it?" he growled at the hapless Centurion.

The man's tone meant nothing to the machine. "Do-you-wish-to-inspect-the-prisoners?"

"Prisoners?" He whirled to face the silvery machine. "You have prisoners?" he demanded.

"Our-primary-function-was-to-investigate-the-distress-signal-and-take-captive-all-we-found," it replied in a droning monotone. "Two-Warriors-were-captured-near-their-ships."

Baltar smiled in anticipation. "Show me these prisoners."

The Centurion led him past the shuttle to a small grove of sturdy, slender trees. Two more Cylons stood on guard there, their attention on two humans secured to separate trees.

Baltar stared down at them. Both had been forced to sit cross-legged, their arms manacled behind them, with the chains securely wrapped around the tree trunks; vines lashed their ankles together.

He knew them both -- Captain Orestes and Sergeant Astarte. They'd been part of the party that captured him earlier in the day. *How delicious to have both of them in my power! And perhaps the rest of the "escort" will soon be captured as well, or convinced to surrender for the sake of these two. And how Cain will squirm!*

The two Colonial Warriors stared warily at him as Baltar began to laugh. He now knew how he was going to get off-planet!

* * * * *

"Commander Cain!" Corporal Memnon cried from his duty post. "Message coming from the planet, sir!"

The boy sounded startled. Cain was surprised. "Major Electra's on her way back?"

"No, sir! It's Baltar! He says he wants to talk to you."

The Commander stared at the young officer, outrage and bewilderment fighting for control. "What?" he finally demanded. "How in Hades did he get at a transmitter? What does he want?"

"Baltar insists that you talk to him, sir. If you don't, he says...he'll kill our Warriors, slowly, before we can get there to help them..." Memnon was still shocked by the message he was relaying.

Cain strode to the console, disbelief replaced by a cold, calculating expression that said his mind was working overtime. "Cain here," he grated into the microphone.

"Greetings, Cain," a voice cooed back to him, the image of a man forming on his screen. "This is Baltar. I want to make a deal with you, now that I have something you want..."

"What in Hades are you talking about?" The transmission was too strong for the weak device Baltar had; he'd somehow gotten access to a stronger transmitter. But how, unless he had help?

A camera panned a wooded scene, zeroing in on Sergeant Astarte, bound to a tree, looking both frightened and angry at the same time, and a little embarrassed at having been put in that position at all.

"As you can see, Cain, I have your Warriors as my prisoners. What I do to them next is on your head. I want to take my shuttle and leave this planet, with your Warriors as my escorts -- which is what you assigned them to be, if you recall. You will let my ship pass, and I will leave you in peace. Hopefully, we will never have to meet again. If you refuse to give me your word on this minor truce, I will order your people killed -- and you know how quick Cylons are to kill humans."

Baltar's image filled the screen again. "Those are your options." He had a wide, secretive smirk on his detestable face. "What's it to be, Cain?"

The Commander was silent for a few microns. "I refuse your truce, and you murder them instantly; I agree to let you escape, and you take them back to Cylon for public execution. I don't like either option, Baltar. Tell you what I'll do. You release them, and show me proof that they're free, and I'll let you have amnesty to leave the planet."

"So you can blow me out of the skies as soon as I hit space? I'm not that stupid, Cain. I've given you your options. I'll give you a few centons to consider what you condemn your people to by refusing to accommodate my simple request."

The image faded. "Transmission cut at source, Commander," Memnon said meekly.

Cain swore. Baltar certainly had something he wanted, but to let the traitor escape was to condemn his people as surely as if he'd signed their execution warrants himself. And who knew what harm the villain could concoct if he were free again?

I can't let him escape! But if he has eight of my finest Warriors as hostages...

He cursed again, ignoring the stares of his bridge crew. They expected him to come up with something -- and he would, but first, he had to vent his rage.

* * * * *

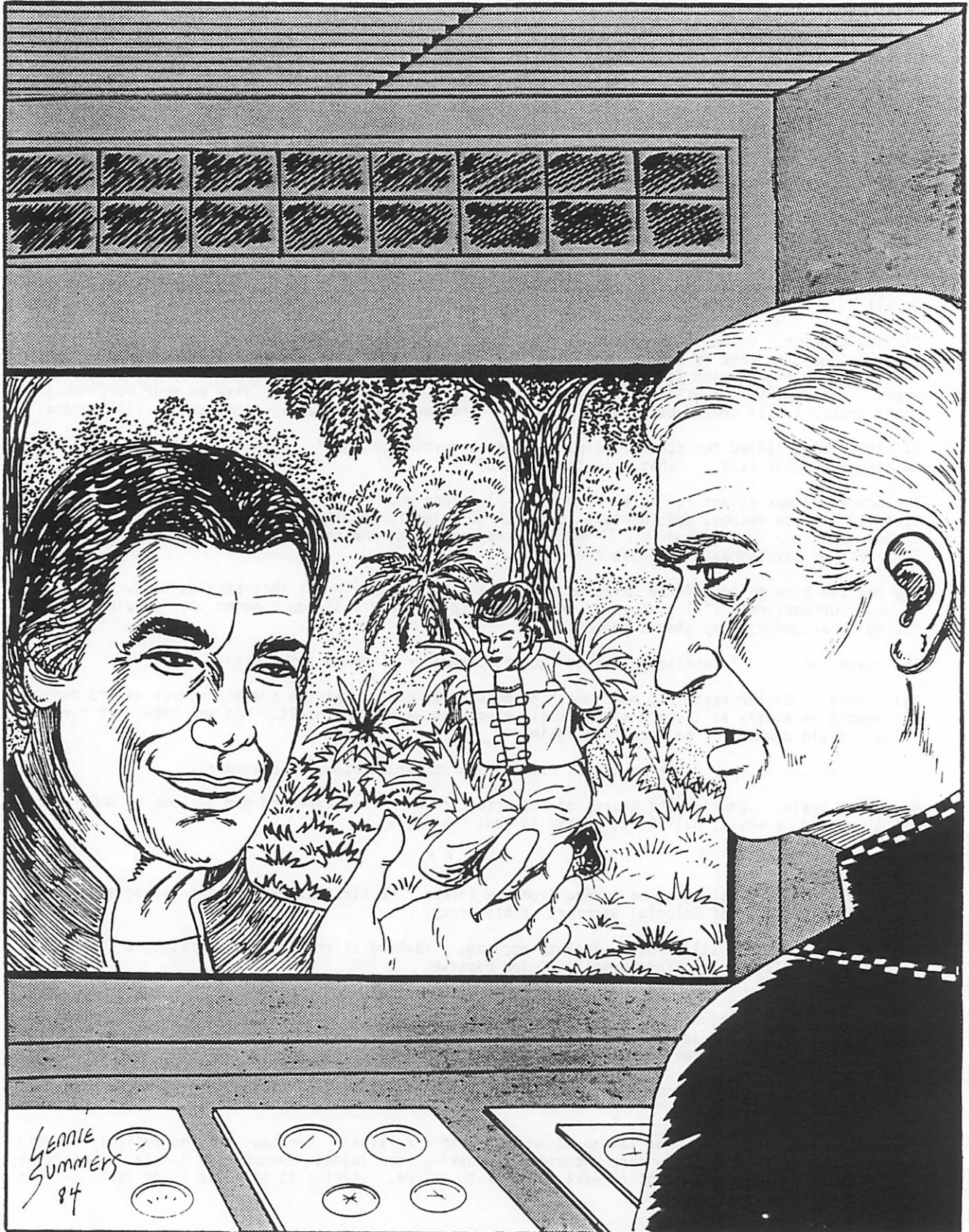
Baltar was still chuckling as he turned from the screen. He strolled over to his two prisoners, enjoying the spectacle of Colonial Warriors at his mercy.

"You told him you had all of us!" Astarte accused, breaking silence for the first time since she'd turned in the clearing to find herself a Cylon captive.

"I said no such thing. He can merely assume whatever he wants from what I said. And the order is no longer to take captives if there is any danger to the Cylons. You two may be the *only* living Warriors on this planet soon. And even if it's otherwise, I suggest you be careful, young lady, or we may kill you last, after you've watched all the others die."

The young woman fumed, glaring at him, but refused to be goaded into saying something she might regret later.

"Are you killing us here, or taking us with you to die later?" Orestes inquired politely. He'd spent most of the past few centars unconscious, having been lugged through the jungle by his captors. It hadn't been pleasant to wake up tied to a tree, staring at metallic Cylon feet -- but



that could, at any time, become the last sight he ever saw, and he wasn't eager to hasten the apparently inevitable moment.

"Soon enough, Captain, soon enough." After a moment of gloating, Baltar turned to give orders to the nearest Centurion. "Load the shuttle. Be prepared to launch at a centon's notice. Commander Cain won't expect us to act so soon. And," -- he smirked at his prisoners -- "since he expects us to have all the Warriors as captives, he won't come back here, especially if he fears a strong Cylon force approaching soon.

"These two will come with us, but we will leave Major Electra and her friends as she was to leave me -- marooned here, with no hope of rescue. But this pair will be guests of the Cylon Empire. Later, I *may* return for the others, when they've had sufficient time to consider their actions against me."

The man laughed uproariously. After a moment spent savouring the looks on his captives' faces, he strutted away to his shuttle. He would soon be free!

* * * * *

I can't do it. I can't let Baltar escape. If he really has my landing party hostage, they're as good as dead anyway. Cylons don't release human prisoners; they kill them -- and they take special delight in the public torture and execution of Warriors...

His people were doomed if he left them in Baltar's hands to be taken aboard a Cylon base star. If he sent Vipers after them, they'd still die -- but probably more quickly. And, considering all the factors, he couldn't balance the harm Baltar could do amongst the Cylons against eight human lives. They were, after all, Warriors -- and this risk was just one more part of their job.

Baltar had to be stopped -- even though it meant his flight commander, two squadron leaders, and five others would die. They would just have to understand, and accept that their sacrifice was for a purpose.

He brushed over the momentary fear that his own hunger for revenge might overshadow the value of those eight lives.

With grim determination, he slammed his riding crop onto the railing of his command deck. Tolan's gaze jerked in his direction as he cringed from the explosive sound.

"Tolan, call all Warriors to their ships -- Vipers and Sunriders both -- and order combat alert. Be ready for battle. Scan turrets, I want to know absolutely everything that moves out there. No surprises this time."

The Flight Officer nodded, efficiently carrying out his responsibility of passing along the Commander's orders.

"Sir!" Memnon's voice sang out. "We picked up something, a small concentration of blips, near the system's star. They're hiding behind the sun."

With the flip of a toggle, Tolan brought the image to the Commander's comm-screen.

Cain studied it for a moment, waiting for Warbook confirmation, then began to laugh almost dementedly. "I was looking for a base star!" he snorted. "But it's only a freighter convoy!"

Tolan gazed at him totally without comprehension.

The Commander elaborated. "Freighters, not a base star. They didn't come here looking for Baltar -- or us. It was all an accident, a freak mischance that they located his transmission, the same as it was for us. Pure chance! And ~~we~~ we can handle freighters. Turrets, keep full range operation, but tell our fighters we're going after easy marks..." He remembered the captives. "And tell them they have friends to avenge. Heimdal to serve as temporary flight commander. Squadron seconds to lead." *Baltar, "old friend," I'll have your head...!*

* * * * *

The Cylons prepared for take-off in their usual hasty, clumsy, mechanical way. Baltar alternated between striding importantly about the camp, yelling orders, and gloating over his prisoners. The watching humans were able to get quite near; the guards had been called in close.

"We can't take them all on at once," Ptah whispered. "There're too many of them. And the others are tied up, can't get out of the way if we open fire..."

"But the Cylons're getting ready to leave," Rissian argued. "They won't be expecting any trouble. And Orestes and Astarte are low enough, out of the way enough, that we shouldn't even have to shoot anywhere near them."

"Unless the Cylons kill them right away when we first attack," Ptah interjected.

Electra was thinking furiously, her eyes fixed on the scene, taking in every detail. *We have to do something soon...*

"There's another group of 'em moving in," Rissian added urgently. "Then they'll really outnumber us. We've got to move *now*!"

"And be surprised by the others?"

"What others?" Electra suddenly demanded, her violet eyes shifting intently to Rissian, who had scouted the shuttle clearing, daring to go almost within spitting distance of Baltar to listen to his commands.

"A group was summoned back from our ships. As Tokyo suggested before, they were waiting to trap us there."

"So we've a little grace period, anyway," she murmured. "And we might slow them down, make them wonder, if that party never gets here... Then, if we strike before they have time to know what's happening..." Her whisper died away, and the preoccupied expression left her face.

She gave her orders. The passive Delphians exchanged glances and nodded approvingly, ready to do whatever she instructed. Trent tried to imitate their calm posture; he came close. Ptah's nervousness showed in the way he kept touching his laser. Rissian's only expression was grim determination; he was ready to die killing Cylons, if it gave him a chance at Baltar.

* * * * *

"The convoy's within strike distance, Commander," Tolan reported. "We've kept the star as a shield, as ordered, and we're keeping rear scan on the planet. They shouldn't expect a thing."

"Good. Launch fighters." Cain's face held a wolfish ferocity. He would destroy the Cylon freighters, then return to speak to Baltar. The traitor would sing a different tune, with no way off the planet, and with Colonial Vipers ready to obliterate him...

* * * * *

"What's keeping the ambushers?" Baltar growled at his Cylon second-in-command. "They should be here by now." His pacing had become progressively more agitated as the centons passed.

"I-do-not-know-what-detains-them. Perhaps-we-must-contact-them-again," the Cylon replied.

Sometimes, Baltar truly detested those built-in Cylon traits that meant they showed no nervousness, no anger, no concern for their fellows, no fear, no understandable reaction to *any* situation other than "if it moves, shoot it; if it complains, skewer it."

The man ground his fist into his palm, staring at the jungle growth around him. The birds had fled the area of Cylon occupation, so there was little sound. Familiar as he was with the place, that disturbed him; he knew, now, that birds made an excellent warning system. And something cold tingled in his spine, making him wonder if they had truly nullified all negative factors in his escape.

There was definitely something *wrong*, but he wasn't sure what it was. As he thought about it, it suddenly occurred to him that he was much more important to the Empire than a handful of mass-produced Cylon soldiers -- and, therefore, he had a right to safeguard himself above those few machines. *I'm not going to wait any longer for that tardy squad...*

"Centurion!" he yelled. "Get the shuttle pilots on board! All Cylons, prepare to board! And..." He paused to leer sadistically at his prisoners. "...bring the prisoners."

He stalked to the small craft, and waited impatiently as three Centurions boarded. A moment later, he could hear the drone of pre-flight orders and checks.

The trees moved gently in the warm, sweetly-scented evening breeze. He shivered, then took a step into the shuttle, his palms sweating. One of the guards cut through the woman's vine-bonds, pulling her to her feet; her arms were still bound behind her.

Good. With her aboard, the Captain will put up no fight. Each as hostage against the other, as well as against Cain...

The urgency in his mind abruptly took a dive into his stomach, twisting it into merciless knots. "Hurry it up, you fools!" he yelled through the open hatchway.

* * * * *

"Now!" Electra commanded.

The humans opened fire. They'd mapped out their lines of fire, their plan of attack, their order of targets. Their aim was almost flawless; it could afford to be nothing less. Cylons began to fall.

* * * * *

Baltar stared open-mouthed from the protection of his shuttlecraft. Somebody was firing on his Cylons -- and the Cylons were losing; not one of them had yet gotten off a shot in return. Then, a Cylon fired, and another, but the shots went wild, didn't seem to hit anything. They couldn't win.

He caught a glimpse of someone moving across the clearing -- a Colonial uniform, a feminine form, a twist of golden hair glinting in a ray of sunlight before she ducked away. A tongue of fire speared from where she'd been, right through his hatchway, missing him by inches, scorching his worn garment and leaving a blasted, smoking, melted scar on the metal wall behind him.

He was too valuable to die now, when he was so close to escape -- and he wouldn't surrender to Cain again!

"Kill the prisoners!" he screamed at the Cylons still standing. Astarte struggled; he saw her fall. Another Cylon raised a sword over the helpless Orestes.

Baltar slammed the doorplate. They could be wasted; he could not. "Take off!" he roared forward, to his Cylon crew. "Now!"

* * * * *

"They're running, sir!"

"Any sign of other Cylon activity?" Cain demanded tersely.

"Negative," Tolan reported.

"Pursue and destroy. Not one gets away."

* * * * *

Sunlight glinted off the raised metal weapon. Electra saw its cold gleam and fired on instinct, without thinking. She saw the intended victim as the Cylon shuddered and fell, and gasped as her brother's eyes locked with hers for a brief micron. She blinked tears from her eyes, then forced herself to seek a new target. They had to get all the Cylons -- and the turbos of the shuttle were whining as the craft approached lift-off power...

Astarte fell to the grass, screaming as a Cylon lifted its sword over her; she couldn't be heard over the laser fire. Someone ran toward her, and a hurtling human form impacted feet-first with the Cylon. The living projectile sent the creature reeling back; it fell in a burst of fire.

The Delphian was still moving; Astarte felt a grip on her arm that yanked her to her feet, nearly wrenching her shoulder from its socket with its unexpected strength. Then they were both running, the woman stumbling as she tried to keep up; he kept her from falling.

Suddenly, it was cooler and darker around her, and the man let her drop to the ground behind a tree as he turned back to the fight. Still chained, she caught her breath, finally recognizing the Warrior as Lieutenant Saigan.

How could anyone move so fast...?

* * * * *

The shuttle lifted off. Rissian continued to fire at it, shrieking curses.

It disappeared into the sky. Baltar was gone.

The Cylons were dead, scattered across the clearing in groups, in small piles of circuitry and flashy metal pieces. Only the humans still stood and moved around, checking to be sure things were as they seemed.

Major Electra took a deep breath, then shakily moved to free her brother.

His smile was equally shaky. "'Bout time you got here..."

* * * * *

"Baltar got away," Rissian repeated flatly.

"And we don't even have a way off this rock," Ptah added gloomily, "since the Cylons wrecked our ships when they decided their trap wasn't going to work."

"Yeah." Trent grimaced. "We can't even repair our communications equipment -- and they torched all our survival gear."

"So what do we do?" Astarte asked anxiously, watching Captain Orestes. His gaze slid to meet his sister's; she smiled in return.

"What're you so happy about?" Ptah demanded grumpily. "We're stuck here -- unless the Commander comes back to give us graves."

"Not necessarily," Electra replied. "Remember why we were here in the first place."

A sly smile appeared on Orestes' face; illumination showed in Tokyo's raised eyebrows.

"Huh?" Astarte persisted, still not understanding.

"We were here to deliver Baltar, and to pick up something..."

Trent began to chuckle. Ptah glared at him, still not comprehending.

"We'll use *Baltar's* transmitter," the Major explained, relenting.

"But its range..."

"We don't have to reach far. The PEGASUS is still up there; I'd bet my life on it," Orestes interrupted. "And I'll bet she's within range. Cain'll know we're here."

"If he hasn't gone chasing Baltar halfway across the galaxy," Rissian muttered. But he looked more hopeful.

"Well, if he doesn't show up, we'll have to set up housekeeping ourselves," Trent commented impudently, as if unconcerned about which they did. "Baltar was kind enough to leave us his things, after all..."

The others glared at him. Astarte threw a wilted flower, left from a trampled, abandoned wreath. Then everybody laughed.

* * * * *

"By-your-command."

"What is it?" Baltar demanded. His nerves were shot; he was anxious to be gone from the entire quadrant. *Cain's not in orbit. Where is he, then?*

"Our-convoy-is-under-attack-by-a-Colonial-battlestar. What-are-your-orders-Commander-Baltar?"

Baltar stared incredulously, then began to laugh. He'd sacrificed most of his Cylon rescue squad. He was quite willing to sacrifice the rest of the small convoy; its cargo was of no vital concern to the Empire, nowhere near as important as *his* return.

"Let Cain have them. Let them be the diversion that allows us to escape. Set course for Cylon. Keep the planet between us and that battlestar. Keep us hidden..."

"By-your-command."

* * * * *

"Welcome back, Major. We were beginning to think we'd lost you forever this time."

Electra nodded at the Commander's courteous but preoccupied greeting. Fortunately, the battlestar had been close enough to pick up their feeble signal. Rissian had ceremoniously destroyed that "damned frakkin' machine" when a PEGASUS landing party arrived to rescue them.

Cain stood at his window-port, staring at the beauty of the universe they traversed in their self-imposed guardian mission.

"Is there something wrong, Commander?" the woman asked. Technically, she had failed in her mission; Baltar had escaped. And she knew Cain's feelings where Baltar was concerned.

"No, no, Major." His mind was still elsewhere.

"Is it Baltar?" she asked boldly. She'd never run from a confrontation, and Cain had always respected her forthright nature. She wouldn't flinch now.

He turned to face her, his eyes glittering with a dark intensity that he kept from his words. "He's alive."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Baltar. He's alive."

"You let him...? But..."

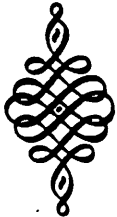
"No, I didn't. But somehow, he's alive. He got away in spite of me, in spite of the PEGASUS. That's twice now, Major. He won't be so lucky a third time."

Electra felt a cold thrill at his words, along with a certainty that there would indeed be a third meeting with the traitor. She knew how Cain felt about Baltar. He was looking forward to that final meeting -- was even eager for it.

Thinking of Baltar's betrayals, so was she.

"Reflections of the Heart"

(By Mary Robertson)

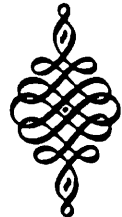


His eyes are very sad, and far too old,
Their lustre darkened by some inner pain
He will not share. He'd turn away, controlled
But angry, if I interfered again.

It's true, I think, that eyes reflect the heart.
I've watched him greet his son. His gentleness
Betrays him then. The child's guileless art
Dispels that air of haunted emptiness.

I've told him how I feel, but he's afraid --
Afraid to care, admit he needs a friend,
Or something more. His ghosts return, invade
His eyes with pain that love cannot pretend
To drive away. He's lonely, and he's scared.

He couldn't trust me when I said I cared.

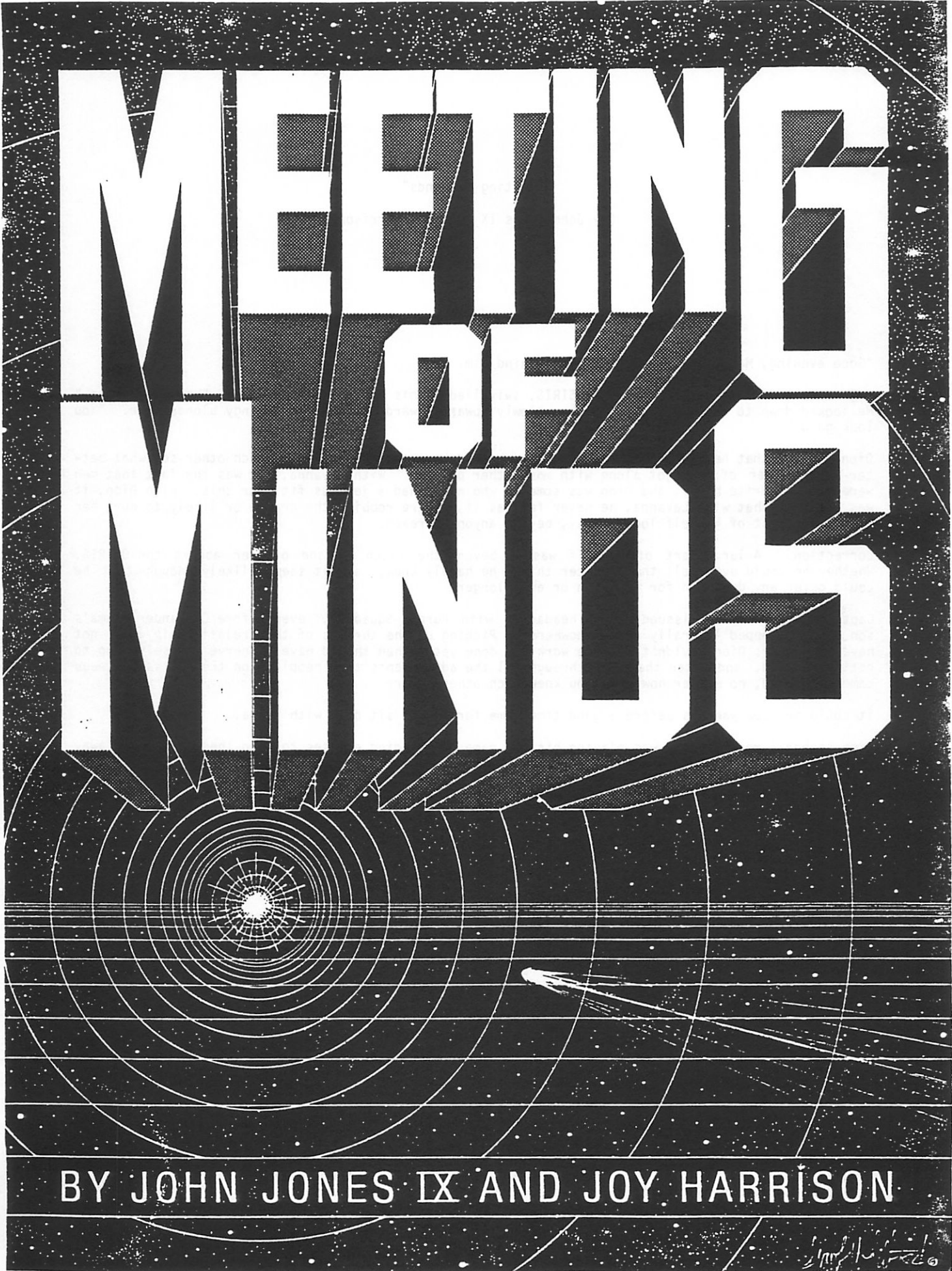


PEGASUS WORD-FIND

(By Deanna MacKenn)

P E G A S U S H Y O W P K R E D I R N U S
 A L R A B M U A S V M A R I K O D D O L H
 Z V D A Y S T A R L H I F W E R R X L T E
 E M L T Q S I G I N W K Y O S M N E Y K R
 N S E T R A T S A M A R T I N O H D C W L
 I O X V Z N G H U O I Y J P R E A S U I O
 A U R W E F J K P K L K W D C V T T L Q C
 L S D D K B F G H I J K A R T A P O E L K
 E C T X A W Q A J M T U A H T R L R E B E
 B S L A I U P O T U Q W E R B A P M A R N
 A S A W E K Q I O S T L O J R P K B S O J
 A Z I T X V H S N W L V G Y I S W R J N I
 L G R M B C Z U L F K A D G S R A E X Z J
 H T E L K H S N N E M U F J U E H A I E L
 N N P P O N A N E L E H K L J V R K L W X
 O E M E E J U S L T T K Q T R L A E U I V
 O R I D G H K L E Q W Y R Z C I T R M N M
 L T L J T Y W A C U I E C E O S S O B G E
 Y O I S D G K F T T B J B I P W E S K O M
 G R A H A M U I R N A L O T V P Q S I Y N
 I Z B M J T E V A O S U P M Y L O B E A O
 A D N U O H R A T S L A I N O L O C A I N

- | | | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------|------------------|
| 1. AKIMI | 11. ELAINE | 21. LEE | 31. SHERLOCK |
| 2. ASTARTE | 12. ELECTRA | 22. LYGIA | 32. SILVER SPAR |
| 3. BAAL | 13. FALSTAFF | 23. MARIKO | 33. STARHAWK |
| 4. BRONZE WING | 14. GRAHAM | 24. MARTIN | 34. STORMBREAKER |
| 5. CAIN | 15. GOLDEN SUN SQUADRON | 25. MEMNON | 35. SUMIKO |
| 6. CICERO | 16. HELENA | 26. OLYMPUS | 36. SUNRIDER |
| 7. COLONIAL STARHOUND | 17. HITO | 27. PA | 37. TITUS |
| 8. COPPER KEEL SQUADRON | 18. IMPERIAL | 28. PTAH | 38. TOKYO |
| 9. CYLON | 19. KENJI | 29. PEGASUS | 39. TOLAN |
| 10. DAYSTAR | 20. KLEOPATRA | 30. RISSIAN | 40. TRENT |



MEETING OF MINDS

BY JOHN JONES IX AND JOY HARRISON

"Meeting of Minds"

(By John Jones IX and Joy Harrison)

I

"Good evening, Major," came a voice from behind him.

Major Dion, Second Archivist of the OSIRIS, swivelled in his chair and looked up. "Hello, Lavanna." He looked down to the woman's feet, then slowly upward toward her head of springy blonde hair. "You look good."

Dion doubted that he was entirely impartial; he and Lavanna got along with each other somewhat better than either of them got along with most other people. With Lavanna, it was the fact that men were her favourite hobby, and Dion was someone who never had a jealous fit over this. With Dion, it was the fact that with Lavanna, he never felt as if he were robbing the cradle or likely to hurt her by keeping most of himself locked away, beyond anyone's reach.

Correction. A large part of himself wasn't beyond the reach of one officer aboard the OSIRIS. Whether he would ever tell that officer this, he hardly knew, and it seemed likely enough that he could defer any decision for a yahren or even longer.

Captain Diana had been issued enough headaches with Purple Squadron, even before Commander Adama's son Apollo dropped literally out of nowhere. Picking up the threads of that relationship must not have been easy; Dion wouldn't bet the work was done yet. Then they'd have to nerve themselves up to getting sealed, and after that, go through all the adjustments that people Dion trusted said *always* came afterward, no matter how well you knew each other before...

It could be *five* yahrens before a good time came for him to sit down with Diana.

Dion sighed, realizing he was playing his old game of finding excuses to keep the past locked away tightly enough to make him feel comfortable, without much regard for the consequences to anyone else. He also realized that, to Lavanna, he must look as if he were losing touch with reality -- and she was a medical technician, who would be sure to make a fuss.

He looked up. "Sorry, Lavanna. Your coming made me think of something else."

The blonde med tech grinned. "If it wasn't women or dinner, maybe I've wasted my trip and my time."

"It was a woman -- and, no, it wasn't the lady from Caprica who looks like Captain Diana."

Lavanna laughed out loud, and Dion felt like doing the same. If she could remain this good-humoured in the face of his usual hobble-footed dance along the edge of being unforgivably rude, she must be in very good spirits indeed. Or maybe that should more accurately be good spirits in *her*? He sniffed, trying to detect ambrosia on her breath; he registered only the usual faint whiff of Life Centre that always clung to her, an even fainter whiff of perfume, healthy woman, and an appetizing smell from the bag hanging on her left shoulder.

"When I came off duty, I heard you were taking Sergeant Chryssipe's duty turn at Archive Central, so I stopped by the mess to pick up a traypak. I hope you like it."

She must also have stopped off in her quarters to change her clothes, Dion realized. She wasn't in uniform, and it seemed unlikely that those trousers -- which must have been sprayed on -- and that tunic -- not quite so tight, but cut delightfully low -- were something she kept in Life Centre. Doctor Senbi was neither prudish nor prone to interfere with his staff's hobbies; on the other hand, Lavanna's hobby was one where she'd found it best to err on the side of tact.

"Thank you. I was thinking of going down there for a sandwich after I came off duty..." And after the squadron pilots and their favourites had faded back to their quarters...

Lavanna reached down and gently poked him in the stomach. "Obviously, whatever hit you there must not have damaged your insides. A leftover mess sandwich for dinner! You must have an armour-alloy stomach!"

"Of course," Dion said blandly. "That's why I'm still alive." He remembered a time when he would have winced at the mere mention of the wound there, which the best plastic surgeons in the Fleet hadn't been able to keep from leaving a scar. That was before the "lady from Caprica" nearly read his mind about his fear of that scar, kissed it -- and didn't stop there.

Lavanna unslung the shoulder bag. In the process, it pulled her tunic off one shoulder -- one very admirably-contoured, creamy shoulder with a light dusting of freckles. Then she sat down on the arm of Dion's chair. The metal groaned ominously, but she ignored it to run her fingers through his greying hair.

He reached up and gripped both of her hands in one of his, then laughed softly. He'd planned to spend most of the rest of the extra watch reading. Few people needed to use Archives during this watch unless there was an emergency; most of those who did could access what they needed with only a few sentences' worth of punched-out data from the Archivists.

However, what were quite obviously Lavanna's plans for him seemed a lot more interesting than anything he'd thought of reading. He wondered if she was planning on "seducing" him here in the chair at Archive Central.

Probably not. She was a careful hobbyist -- she knew which men were fit for that kind of antics, and he wasn't one of them. She also probably had mentally catalogued every level surface in Archives, including its size, consistency, and degree of privacy.

Dion laughed again, and put his free arm around Lavanna's waist.

II

Lieutenant Morgan was considerably taller than Captain Diana, enough so that he was able to look over the top of her head at Major Dion in his chair at the main console of Archive Central. The two pilots stood in the doorway for a moment, to let Dion give them personal permission to enter after the ID check; he nodded, and they went in.

From close to the Major, Morgan saw a tray-load of empty dishes shoved almost out of sight under the console. He also saw that Dion's face was flushed under his tan, and that his greying hair was in considerable disarray. He added these facts to his memory of having seen Lavanna on her way out of the mess with a remarkably similar tray, and hoped he and Diana hadn't interrupted anything that both parties would probably consider at least as important as anything the two pilots were about to say.

He was almost tempted to do a telepathic scan of the Archives Section to see if Lavanna was still there and entitled to whatever apology he could manage without revealing how he'd found her. He decided against it, as he always did when there was a question of possibly violating somebody's mental privacy in a situation that wasn't a life-or-death emergency. This was nothing of the kind, just a minor point of good manners -- and Lavanna never worried about minor points of anything in pursuit of her hobby.

At this point, he noticed that his red-haired companion was shooting him a look which reminded him not at all gently that his mind was a little too blatantly elsewhere. This would never do, considering what they'd come here to do and how unlikely they were to do it even if both he and Diana put their best feet forward.

At least, Dion didn't seem to be offended. He was smiling as he looked from Morgan to Diana. "Does he often do that, Captain?"

"Not too often, Major."

"I'm sure you don't. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here. Vipers don't forgive absent-mindedness easily. Cylons don't forgive it at all."

A subtle flaring of Diana's nostrils told the telepath she'd scented an opening, like some hunting beast scenting prey. "That's why we asked to see you."



"To cure Lieutenant Morgan's bad habits?"

The Lieutenant in question swallowed laughter at Dion's elaborately raised eyebrows, and at his Captain's equally obvious effort not to stamp her foot. She looked rather as he'd seen her a few times after she'd missed an easy Cylon kill.

"Lieutenant Morgan has so many bad habits that he's past hope of being cured," she said. "What we were coming to ask you was whether you'd like to record a history of your career, and some of the lessons it taught you."

"My career? I don't think the Archivists really need to sit through 'My Twenty Yahrens as a Recluse,' although if they are really insisting..."

Diana looked about ready to interrupt, which Morgan knew as if he'd seen it written in the air in letters of fire would blast their hopes of getting anything done. He put a hand on her shoulder and gripped her lightly while the Major rambled on, an unmistakable note of laughter in his voice. The red-head's face was turning the same colour as her hair, which meant she was angry -- but probably more at herself than at Dion or him. When she was angry at someone else, her face went shockingly pale.

Finally, Dion ran down, and leaned back in his chair to survey the two pilots. "Or have I made a mistake about your reasons for coming here?"

Morgan's frown of concentration wasn't for show. He wanted to pick his words with exquisite care. "The career we meant was your Fleet career as a combat pilot. I know both weaponry and tactics have changed extensively, but I'd bet a yahren's pay that there are some things you knew then that most of the pilots today don't -- and should."

Diana's face was no longer the only flushed one in the room. "You're flattering me, Lieutenant."

"No, sir, I don't think I am. It's not flattery to know who Major Dion is."

"Was, Lieutenant. *That* Major Dion is dead. Are you sure a ghost has anything to tell your pilots?"

"He lived gallantly, and died the same way -- if he died at all," Diana said. "Yes, I think such a Warrior's ghost has a great deal to teach."

"If you'd used any other word but 'gallant'..." began Dion.

His mouth stayed open for the space of a couple of heartbeats, with no sound coming out -- then he seemed to fly out of his chair toward Diana and Morgan. Before the telepath could question whether this was a fit of insanity, or wonder at Dion's speed, the Major was on top of both of them, sweeping them off their feet and onto the rug, landing on top of them.

They'd just hit the rug when a console halfway across the room erupted in a sheet of blue flame and flying debris.

Hitting the deck knocked all the breath out of Morgan; having Diana's elbow in his belly didn't help him get it back. Nor did having one knee twisted under Dion, although the Major was neither tall nor carrying much extra weight.

This was the kind of emergency situation where the Lieutenant's telepathy went to automatic alert. In any case, when he was in physical contact with somebody, it was almost impossible for him to suppress *some* awareness of them without the kind of effort he didn't have the strength to make even if he'd wanted to.

He read a precognitive awareness associated with other qualities he recognized as Diana's, and now realized she'd rolled with Dion's "attack" as if she'd known it was coming -- and maybe even *why*.

Now that the bomb had gone off, the "why" was gruesomely obvious. If they hadn't been flat on the deck when it exploded, they'd have been chopped to pieces by flying debris -- if they hadn't already been smeared all over the opposite bulkhead.

For a moment, Morgan detected a second telepathic presence, then everything seemed to happen at once. Dion sprang to his feet; Diana followed him. Although his uniform was a tattered mess, the Major didn't seem badly hurt. Diana staggered across the room toward the manual fire extinguisher mounted by the door. The door slid shut as she reached it; Dion swore; and Morgan sensed a third telepathic presence that he would very much have liked to shut out.

He couldn't, for all that it was an obscenity for a mind like that to even exist, let alone make it-



self known to others. It was a mind rotten with madness, a madness that had led the man -- Morgan was sure it was a man -- to set the bomb in the Archives Section, then seal the door on the three survivors of the ensuing explosion.

The man was just outside the door, laughing softly as he used a rescue cutter to fuse the lock and latches. Morgan instantly rejected his first idea, taking telepathic control of the man and forcing him to open the door. It was now sealed against anything short of full Rescue Squad equipment.

Besides, Dion and Diana wouldn't have taken the easy way out even if the telepath had given it to them. Diana had the fire extinguisher in her hands; then it was in mid-air; then Dion was snagging it, turning, and activating it in a single motion almost too fast for even Morgan's trained eye to separate into its individual parts.

If Dion's reflexes were like this now, what had they been when he was the master Cylon-killer of the Fleet? He must have been faster than Diana, which was saying a good deal.

At this point, Morgan realized that nobody would be saying anything more about any of the three of them except at a memorial service, if the smoke got any thicker. The bombed console and two others damaged by flying debris were all pouring out smoke and fumes and sparks, and no doubt horrifying quantities of toxic substances. The ventilation fans seemed to have gone, the door was sealed, and one fire extinguisher wasn't going to put out all three fires. In fact, Dion had just used it up on the first blaze and was stripping off his tunic to try beating out the second. The automatic dousing system must have gone in the blast, too, otherwise...

Then Morgan remembered that Archives and other computer facilities didn't have automatic dousing systems. They were low fire-hazard areas -- officially, at any rate -- and a massive spraying could do more damage to the computers than any fire.

That was doubtless a sound calculation -- if you didn't take the *people* into account. As one of the people not taken into account, he would have cheerfully strangled the Fleet's damage control classifiers. Not having any of them ready to hand, he stretched out on the rug, exhaled completely to reduce the amount of toxic garbage in his lungs, and concentrated all his telekinetic power on one of the ceiling panels. His body arched as if he were having a convulsion; sweat popped out all over him; and he was terribly afraid he was going to lose control of everything -- including the telekinesis -- before he felt the panel give.

One more push. It peeled upward, and Morgan's starved lungs sucked in fume-laden air. He nearly passed out then and there. Instead, his dimmed vision saw Diana strip off her tunic with its non-conducting inner layer and toss it to Dion, who plunged into the cloud of smoke from the third fire and started stuffing the tunic into the panel. The rest of the smoke started creeping toward the exit he had made for it, as Diana, with one quick glance at the ceiling, knelt beside Morgan.

"Lie back," she said, and didn't wait for him to obey. She shoved him back with all her surprising strength and started mouth-to-mouth respiration. A few breaths returned him to what might loosely be called full consciousness. Another few, and he had the strength to telekinetically rouse a small breeze, to push the smoke toward the opening in the ceiling.

It helped that Major Dion had pretty well smothered the last fire with Diana's tunic. He gripped the back of the chair with both hands, and rammed the wadded fabric in even tighter with one foot. Then his other leg buckled under him, and he collapsed, rolling even as he went down to avoid hitting his head on the base of the chair.

Diana started to jump up to help him, swayed, and seemed to realize it would be better to crawl. She was crawling toward Dion when the madman's telepathic presence suddenly winked out of even the fringes of Morgan's psychic awareness. A moment later, a number of things considerably heavier than fists were pounding on the door.

Since there was nothing more he could do to help either Diana or the rescuers, and since he was now reasonably certain they would survive, Morgan decided it would not be abandoning his post of duty to pass out.

III

When Dion woke up, he didn't waste anybody's time -- including his own -- by asking, "Where am I?" He didn't even have to open his eyes to answer the unspoken question. He'd spent enough time in medical facilities to have their sounds and smells imprinted on every level of his mind he knew of,

and probably on some he didn't.

Still without opening his eyes, he took an inventory of his injuries. It was a good sign that he was in shape to do that at all, and the sign didn't lie. He had a tube running into his left arm, for only the Lords knew what healers' potion, and his right wrist was immobilized. Elsewhere, he felt nothing but dulled pains where cuts and bruises had been sprayed and sealed, and a number of aches and pains from muscles forced to do unaccustomed things.

He was fairly sure some of those muscular aches antedated the explosion and all the liveliness that had followed. He was growing no more limber as the yahrens passed, even if he did try to keep himself in shape -- and Lavanna was growing no less inventive.

He took a deep breath, which set off a fit of coughing and forced him to open his eyes. He was in a monitored Life Centre bed with a controlled-environment capsule around it. He recognized the faint shimmer of the capsule's almost-clear walls, and sniffed the air; it was at a higher than normal pressure, enriched with oxygen, and probably sterilized. He took a shallower breath, didn't cough, but recognized some of the symptoms of toxic-smoke inhalation.

Annoying, but he could hardly call it anything worse. In fact, he'd been rather lucky, considering how deep he'd been into the smoke and extinguisher fumes without a mask. Lucky, too, that the explosion-weakened seam in the ceiling had finally given way at the right time, when there was enough heat to create an updraft that disposed of most of the smoke...

And he could still be satisfied that enough of the old Warrior's reflexes were still with him that he hadn't needed too much luck. If he hadn't been able to anticipate the explosion the way he'd used to anticipate a Cylon's breaking left, all of them would have been in the line of too many pieces of debris. Diana would have been hit the worst...

Dion didn't realize what ~~that~~ thought did to his heartbeat and respiration until a med tech suddenly opened the end of the environment capsule and hurried in to see what was wrong.

The Major forced a smile. "No trouble, Sergeant. I just realized I didn't know how the other two people caught in there with me were doing."

The med tech returned the smile mechanically but said nothing until she was satisfied that Dion's vital signs weren't doing anything catastrophic. Then her smile widened.

"Lieutenant Morgan is suffering from shock and smoke inhalation. Captain Diana is suffering from the same, plus some minor burns and lacerations. Morgan will be back on duty tomorrow, Diana the day after that."

"Good. I thought they were probably better off than I was, but it's nice to be sure. I won't ask you how I am, because I know all I'll get is a song and dance."

The tech smiled again. "You would, indeed. In fact, you're not even supposed to talk until Doctor Senbi examines your throat tomorrow."

"All right. I'll be as mute as a canopy locking bolt -- if you'll tell me one other thing. Did they catch whoever was responsible for the explosion? It *was* a bomb, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was, and they did..."

And you won't tell me any more because that might have implications for my validity as a witness, and the Legal Division would make a fuss...

Whoever had set that bomb deserved nothing kinder than a quick death.

IV

"So Major Dion had already moved to shield the two of you when the bomb went off?"

Morgan frowned in annoyance, but hoped it would be taken for concentration. "That's true, to the best of my memory," he replied. He didn't want to annoy this man who called himself Captain Myron.

He particularly didn't want to annoy this man in a way that would lead him to go to Diana and pester her. Dion, at least, was safe; in a controlled-environment bed, nobody but medical personnel were allowed near him. A pity, in a way, because both Morgan and Diana would have liked to try finding some way of thanking him for their lives, but if it kept Captain Myron out of the Major's hair...

"You understand, I wasn't exactly standing there with a timer on the sequence of events. The only reason I'm fairly sure it happened that way is because we'd all have been punctured in a few dozen places if we hadn't been down out of the line of most of the debris."

Myron nodded in silence. He seemed to be good at that, and his mouth looked as if it were better designed to stay closed than to speak.

Morgan cautiously stretched taut muscles under the bed covers. The headache and exhaustion from his telepathic work were fading; they would fade even faster if he didn't have to submit to his unwanted visitor's questioning.

Myron nodded again, more sharply, as if he'd made up his mind about something. "You were the least injured of the casualties, weren't you?"

"So I've been told. I assume the same Life Centre personnel also talked to you."

The other man's eyebrows rose. They were bushy and dark brown, with flecks of grey. They were also the only hair on his small, neat head. His bald forehead gleamed so brightly that Morgan wondered if it were polished.

"They did. They say you spent most of the time of the incident on the deck -- without any injuries sufficiently serious to immobilize you, I might add. Now, I'm familiar enough with your combat record, so you don't need to bristle at me, but..."

"Captain Myron!" came a voice from overhead. It was Doctor Senbi on the intercom, sounding like one of the Lords of Kobol disturbed while suffering from a bad hangover.

"Doctor, I believe I am approaching a critical aspect of the whole incident, one which..."

"Captain, my foot will be approaching the seat of your pants in a couple of microns. Either that, or you will be approaching the door of my Life Centre -- on your way out!"

"Doctor, I will not tolerate harassment or interference in the performance of my duties. If I am subjected to either for no reason, I will have to speak about this to Commander Christopher!"

"You are at perfect liberty to speak to anybody you please, and I will obey any lawful orders from those who are my superiors. In the meantime, stop harassing Lieutenant Morgan, and *get out of my Life Centre!*"

Captain Myron had an unduly exalted notion of his importance as a Criminal Justice Division officer. That didn't make him fool enough to force a head-on collision with Senbi on the doctor's home ground -- particularly not with the entire Life Centre staff alerted by Senbi's last blast; it must have been audible far and wide, even without the intercom, and those who had heard would quickly spread word of it to those who hadn't.

Morgan was cautiously putting his feet on the deck and looking for a robe when Senbi himself came in. "I'm sorry I dragged you into this..." the Lieutenant began, but Senbi cut him off.

"I should have stood my ground against interrogation of any of you for a few days. I let Myron loose on you because you were in the best condition, and he was fussing about the loss of vital data with the passage of time."

"He'd have a point, if there was any vital data any of us could provide. All we know about the bomb is its effects, and we don't know the first thing about who set it."

"Myron doesn't agree with you. He's curious about a number of things besides what he mentioned to you just now."

Morgan forced himself not to ask what those might be. He didn't want to give even Senbi clues that might prick his curiosity. Instead, he grinned. "What did you inject him with, to make him confide in you?"

Senbi shrugged. "Myron isn't a monster or a fool. I do think he's one of the people who hasn't adjusted to the fact that we may never find the GALACTICA or her Fleet. He's the only CJD man aboard, so he thinks he has to stay on duty every micron in order to have his files up to date when we catch

up with Adama. I had to practically chain him up to keep him from interrogating Captain Apollo when he first came aboard."

The doctor poured himself some fruit juice from a carafe on the table alongside Morgan's bed, and sipped it. Over the rim of the glass, he fixed the Lieutenant with a sharp look. "His threat to bring Commander Christopher into this isn't idle, I'm afraid. The Commander is deeply concerned about this bombing. Between you and me, I suspect the fact that his wife might have been killed by the explosion has something to do with it. So I'm going to walk very softly where he's concerned, and I suggest you do the same. A few bad moments with Captain Myron are a cheap price for staying on good terms with Christopher."

Morgan had to fight an urge to snarl, "Somebody I care about just as much nearly *was* killed," but won the battle in time to keep Senbi from noticing anything. The doctor finished his juice, checked his patient's vital signs, and departed.

Alone for the first time in what seemed like centuries, Morgan got back into bed, stretched out, and tried unsuccessfully to relax. His thoughts jumped about too wildly to let him.

He knew perfectly well why Dion had been alert to the bomb explosion *before* it happened. The Major had a slight precognitive faculty that could give him a fraction of a micron's warning of danger. He wasn't the only Warrior Morgan knew who had it, either. In fact, Diana was one of the others.

And since the quality was usually hereditary, did this say something about a blood tie between Dion and Diana? Diana was adopted, her real parents unknown and doubtless dead, so there could be no chance of ever finding out, and even if there was a blood relationship, there was no reason to suppose it was particularly close.

Time for idle speculation later. The more immediate problem was Captain Myron. Morgan was inclined to agree with Senbi's theory that Myron wasn't entirely stable any more. Yet he probably wasn't sufficiently unsound to be relieved from duty, not when the OSIRIS might some day need a CJD expert, maybe even for internal security. Certainly, it seemed unlikely that Christopher would tolerate the man's relief from duty in the middle of this investigation, or be very happy if Doctor Senbi filed a report that required it. That could lead to distrust between the Commander and the chief of Life Centre, and the OSIRIS needed *that* like she needed to meet a Cylon base star!

Yet if Myron kept on the way he'd begun, sooner or later he would wind up suspecting Dion of having something to do with the bombing, and suspecting Morgan of losing his nerve.

Nobody would believe such a charge against Morgan; and Christopher, Arsenaux, and all the pilots would have Myron's head if he tried to push it. But who would speak up for Dion, whom most people knew only as the remote and bookish Second Archivist, aged and uninteresting?

The Lieutenant could prevent this, by admitting Myron to the secret of his telepathic abilities, and *everything* he'd done with it after the explosion. If he could trust the man's discretion, that would solve everything very neatly -- but Morgan knew better than to trust a CJD officer's discretion about *anything*, even when the man was in his right mind. Given Myron's present disposition...

Maybe Morgan was fighting for a lost cause, trying to keep his abilities a secret. Perhaps it wasn't a cause even worth fighting for. There were plenty of people who understood that telepaths had rigid codes of ethics about using their powers -- more rigid codes than most people had for governing their normal talents.

Yes, and there were plenty of other people to whom telepaths were as alien and dangerous as Cylons. Some of those were as unstable as Myron -- even as unstable as whoever had set the bomb. What could come of making himself a target for them -- himself, and perhaps Diana and Apollo, and all the others who would stand by him to the death?

In this case, he realized, that might not be entirely a figure of speech.

It looked as if innocent people were going to be chewed up no matter what he said or didn't say. This was going to be no sort of decision to make easily.

Fortunately, Doctor Senbi had bought him a day or two of time. If he could just talk with Diana, and then both of them approach Dion before Captain Myron came sniffing around again...

If they could do that, they would indeed have a chance...

Meanwhile, he felt totally drained, and that drained feeling was turning into a healthy post-stress desire for sleep. Morgan turned out the light, and gave that desire control of his body.

A round, bearded face with a high forehead, set on a square-built body in stained coveralls, swam in front of Dion's eyes. "Father?"

Then he realized that he was awake again, and must have just monumentally embarrassed Gunnery Sergeant Jones -- who, come to think of it, did look a little like his late father...

Dion shook his head, which was a mistake. Small animals with sharp teeth seemed to nip various portions of his anatomy. At least the fact that Jones was standing beside the bed proved the controlled-environment capsule had been removed, so he had to be improving. *It must be just that awkward stage of the healing process...*

"Major?"

"Sorry. I was more asleep than I thought."

"No sweat. The Commander sent me by your quarters to bring you some books."

Dion was suddenly alert enough to forget he was hurting. He sat up. "Christopher? Did he send anything else with the books?"

"No, sir."

"Tactful of him," muttered Dion.

"Sir?"

"Never mind. I was thinking of someone else." Specifically, he was thinking of a friend who'd electrocuted herself fixing a washing machine light-yahrens from the nearest functioning Cylon.

Jones nodded politely, then looked around before speaking in a voice just above a whisper. "Is this place secure?"

"What from?" asked Dion in the same tone. Then he added, "If you want to keep something from Doctor Senbi, I'd think twice about saying it here. Otherwise, go ahead."

Jones laughed. It wasn't pleasant laughter. "Doctor Senbi is going to be on our side. It's all over Life Centre, what he said to Captain Myron. Won't be long before it's all over the OSIRIS, either."

The Major had the feeling he was reading a book with half the chapters missing, and he was fairly sure it wasn't due to either the drugs or his injuries. "Jones," he said quietly, "suppose you start this story at the beginning. I remember a Captain Myron of Criminal Justice. But what has he to do with Doctor Senbi?"

"Plenty," Jones said, and told the story of Myron's running wild with suspicions of Morgan and Dion, and having to be driven out of Life Centre by Senbi. "He'll be back, though. The Commander won't let the investigation drop. Hits too close to home."

It was tempting to suggest that Christopher might as well drop the investigation for all the good that would come from it in Myron's hands. It might even be true. It would hardly be tactful, though, and Dion smelled a situation approaching in which every bit of Christopher's good will would be needed.

"Can't he at least insist on Myron not chasing anybody else until he's interrogated the man who actually set the bomb?"

Jones grunted. "That's going to be a long time, maybe never. Those bilge-scum who jumped on him did it so hard they fractured his skull, maybe did permanent brain damage. It's long odds he'll ever be able to talk again."

Dion used his own choice of expletives. "Do they know anything about him at all?"

"They've identified him as Chase, a civilian technician from Botany. He was apparently some kind of religious fanatic, who said the computers were trapping the souls of alien life forms we'd brought aboard. He never made any threats, but they did transfer him to a section where he wouldn't have access to any dangerous chemicals. Or, at least, he wasn't supposed to."

Both veterans knew too well how little administrative reshufflings could really do to stop a determined fanatic. They also knew that some of the administrative types didn't know this, or would be more than ready to pretend not to know it in the hope of shifting blame for the bombing.

"The Botany people may come down on Myron's side if he keeps pushing long enough to have a side," Dion mused. "I suppose it won't occur to him that I have even less access to weaponry than this frakking maniac?"

Jones knew a rhetorical question when he heard one. "Is there anything else I can get you, sir?"

The Major scanned the titles of the books -- all bound printed volumes doubtless borrowed from Miss Davenport -- the traditional kind of books he liked because you could *feel* them. "No more books, thanks. These will keep me much longer than I'm likely to be here, unless I take a turn for the worse, or Senbi goes as mad as Myron."

"Then good night, sir, and I hope to see you back on your feet soon." Jones rose and turned to go.

"Jones!"

"Sir?"

"Get me a stylus and pad." He licked lips which suddenly seemed as dry as the deserts of Leo.

"Should I call Doctor Senbi, Major? You look..."

"I feel fine, Sergeant. Or, at least, I will after you bring me that stylus and pad."

"Sir." The Gunnery Sergeant would probably talk to Senbi on the way out, but the job would be done by then.

Since the message consisted only of two items of equipment, one recording, and four code groups, Dion had it all composed in his mind by the time Jones returned. The stylus flew over the pad in spite of the need to write with his left hand; Dion blessed the fact that he was ambidextrous enough so samples of his writing with both hands existed in the files. That should be as much identification as he'd need to have Christopher act on the message -- certainly on *this* message.

Jones read the message through, his face taking on the look of a man being devoured by respectful curiosity. "Wouldn't it be simpler to have the recording put through to your bedside terminal, rather than bring a portable reader and hush-phone set?"

"Simpler, yes. Safer, no. One of those codes is an access code for the portable reader. Once the recording is in the reader, nobody without the code can find out what's in the recording. Even the 'secure' line from the central computer might not do as well, depending on how a certain CJD Captain is thinking."

"True. Although if he *is* tapping it, the recording might be a good bait to force him into... Sorry, sir, just thinking out loud."

The Major realized his face must have given away more than he thought. Well, perhaps that was another argument for the decision he'd made; one of these days, his face might give away as much or more to a man less discreet than Jones. "Think about something else. That would be a good idea with some messages, but this one involves other people."

"I understand."

Do you? Dion asked himself after the Gunnery Sergeant had left. *For that matter, do you understand yourself why you're doing this, after putting it off for so long?*

Maybe it's just wanting someone to feel sorry for me when Myron runs wild.

Maybe, but if so, you're giving in to the kind of morbidity and gloom you fought off so well that night you said goodbye to Scylla. Is she going to lose her victory now, after all these yahrens?

He squeezed his eyes shut until he was sure he wasn't going to cry -- not like a grown man in grief, but like a child frightened of the dark. The possibility that he was going to destroy someone by reaching out to touch her frightened him more than any Cylon odds ever could have.

He lay back and forced himself to think more calmly. He not only couldn't be sure that his motives were good, he couldn't even be sure what they were. That was reason enough to be -- not precisely frightened -- wary?

Yes, wary, like a hunter trailing dangerous game. Nothing more. Human motives weren't divided into black and white; why should he expect the Lords to make an exception for him? Even more, why should he expect total clarity of intellect when he was moderately sick, probably full of drugs, and certainly not completely free of a dose of toxic garbage breathed in with smoke? He'd try to do some mathematics tomorrow, and if his wits passed that test... Well, tomorrow could be the day.

And if not tomorrow, then the day after, or the day after that, but *some* day soon. He would not go back on his decision, because that would be something he could not do and still retain his self-respect.

He remembered the words Commander Christopher had doubtless thought of quoting from the recording. *You'd better examine your conscience, Major, about how long you've kept silent, and how much longer you want to do so. I won't ask you to do more, however. I swore on my honour to hold my peace on this, and I will keep that oath...*

The Major was grateful for Christopher's tact, but that did not make his words any less true. Accepting that even made it possible for Dion to sleep, rather to his surprise.

VI

Captain Diana accepted Major Dion's request to visit his room alone because she was curious about why he emphasized the "alone." It was unlikely his reason was anything as simple as a proposition, which he was unlikely to be in shape for, anyway -- although she remembered the saying about giving old daggits a last bite.

Whatever his reason, it was likely to break the monotony of her stay in Life Centre. She'd reached that particularly annoying stage -- well enough to feel bored, and not well enough to be released to her quarters. The fact that she'd been through the routine six or seven times before didn't help her endure it any more quietly now. Doctor Senbi said she was the worst patient in the squadrons -- a status she wasn't particularly proud of, but didn't see any chance of losing.

She could also make the visit this morning without either of the men in her life having to be put off. Morgan had already thanked Dion and been released from Life Centre. Apollo had been in to see her, and was now out on a patrol that would keep him in his Viper for the rest of the day. Why this should affect her timing, she didn't know; she only knew it would probably be best to follow her instincts now, and worry about the "why" later.

In dressing gown and slippers, her hair roughly tied back, Diana made her way down the corridor to Dion's door. It was ajar, and the Major said, "Come in," even before she knocked.

He was sitting up in bed with a printed book open on his lap and a portable viewer on the swinging table beside the bed. He looked so austere that she had blurted out half her apology for pressing him about recording his history and advice before he could raise a hand to stop her.

"Captain, I appreciate your consideration, but I think you and Morgan were right. I've been sitting on...a lot of things, besides my own rump...for too long. Things that could help other people."

His quick agreement left her in a rare condition -- totally speechless. She pulled up a chair and sat down while he continued.

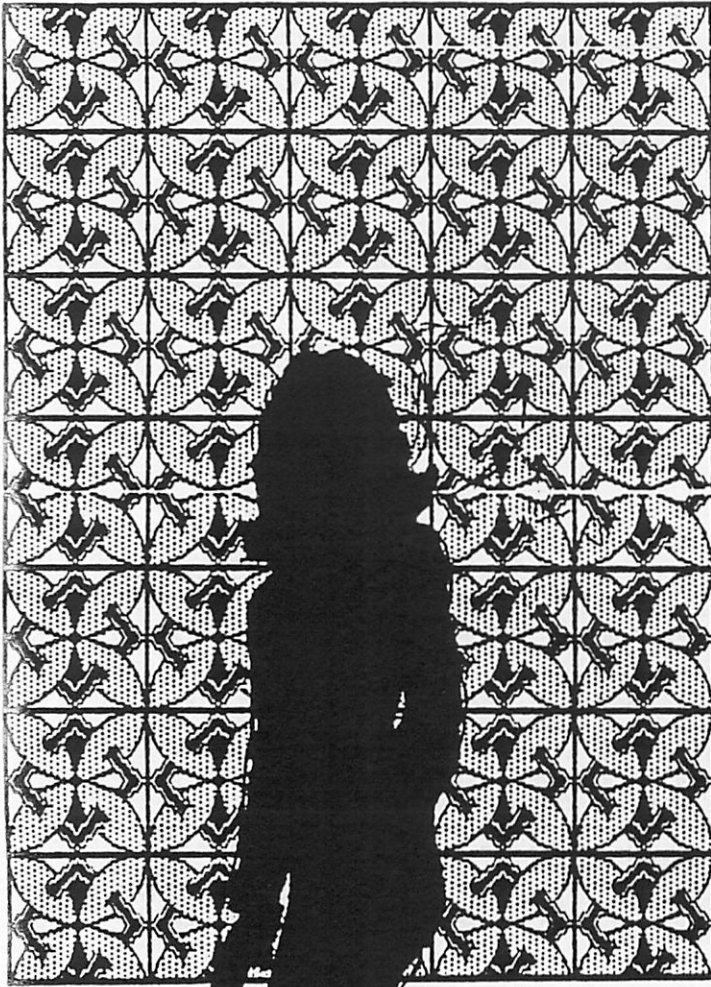
"Captain...how important is it for you to know who your real parents were?"

She stared at him for a moment, then forced her tongue into motion. "To be perfectly honest, I haven't thought about it in yahrens, because I've given up all hope of ever knowing. I know I'm not any blood relative of Adama, which is what settled things for Apollo and me. Beyond that, well, I suppose I was a war orphan. On Caprica, you could hardly throw a brick on a crowded street without hitting one."

"Does that mean you'd rather *not* know?"

The emphasis he'd put on that one word... Something was very odd here. She knew her instincts had done their work again.

"I can't imagine what harm it would do for me to know. If I'm the daughter of some traitor or criminal, well, I don't think enough people will judge me for that to cause any trouble. And if there's some sort of hereditary health problem, Apollo and I should know that, too, before we're sealed.



"Children aboard the OSIRIS are going to have enough trouble without that.

"However," she said firmly, "you've drawn me out on what seems to be a purely hypothetical matter. I can't imagine..."

"I doubt the purity of that hypothesis," Dion said, without the faintest trace of a smile.

Diana had to swallow before she went on. "You mean...in the Archives, you found some clues about who my parents might be...?" She wanted to say more, but didn't want to seem to believe in the impossible happening, not in the face of the man's grim dignity.

"Yes." Dion swivelled the bedside table so the reader screen was toward Diana, then pushed a hush-phone headset toward her. When she'd put it on, he used the remote control to punch in an access code. She couldn't help noticing that he carefully shielded the controls with his free hand. He was going to keep control of the situation until...

(Personal entry to File 7, COMMANDER'S EYES ONLY, from Major Dion, Second Archivist)

Second Archivist aboard the OSIRIS isn't really a combat post, so Commander Christopher's requirement that combat personnel record basic biographical data doesn't in theory apply to me. Also, I still dislike talking about my life before I entered the Academy of History. There isn't much about the first twenty-five yahrens of my life of which I can now honestly say I'm very proud.

Yet even though I hold a non-combat post, I can't assume I'm immortal. One of my best friends in the Academy electrocuted herself trying to fix a washing machine, on a planet which hadn't seen a functioning Cylon in yahrens. The universe may not be exactly unfriendly, but it is certainly accident-prone.

The fact also remains that one episode in my early yahrens may hold the answer to a vital question about one of the OSIRIS combat people. If I die without recording some sort of autobiography, I'll take that secret to the Lords with me. So I have received permission from Commander Christopher to record my story in his private File 7. Only he has access to it, and he has promised he will reveal what I record here only after my death. I trust the Commander enough to be sure I have nothing more to fear.

Dion stopped the recording. "That last statement is no longer true, although it shouldn't have taken a madman with a bomb to teach me."

The recording continued, tracing Dion's career as the Fleet's top Cylon-killer, his wounding, his disgrace and self-exile, and how the love of a woman named Scylla had helped him keep sanity and self-respect. By the time it reached the episode of the photograph of the Caprican red-head who wasn't the "Ice Princess" of Purple Squadron, Diana was so absorbed that she hardly noticed a nickname that usually infuriated her. She had the feeling she was living through a waking nightmare -- except that she didn't want it to end, because what lay at the end might be, had to be...

Captain Diana is Scylla's daughter, and mine.

She looks like Scylla. She even has some of the same mannerisms. She is an adopted child, who never knew her real parents. She was born on Caprica, at a date which makes it certain she was conceived during the summer Scylla and I spent together.

"There are lots of red-heads on Caprica," you say, throwing my own words back at me. True. But red-heads who look so much like my Scylla that people mistake her for them, and who are exactly the right age to come from our summer of love? They don't grow on bushes.

Scylla must have spent that yahren on Caprica caring for her mother, and also having our daughter. Then she put the girl up for adoption, and went home to die in her husband's chains. I cried when I knew that was how it must have been, the first time thinking of Scylla had brought tears to my eyes in many yahrens.

That is as far as I will go now. I don't know Diana well enough to be sure how she'd take learning the secret of her birth while I'm still alive. I find myself very much of two minds about even seeking more advice from the Commander or Major Meret. I'm definitely not going to put down all my thoughts on this now. But I will say this much.

Diana, if you hear this after I am dead, judge me as you will. But think of your mother as a great and gallant lady, who gave new life to a burned-out fighter pilot, and in doing so gave you life itself.

May the Lords bring you safe to the end of your journey, and at the end of that journey give you such a love for your own.

"Father?"

At least, that was what she tried to say. It came out a pitiful whimper, like a dying bastling. "You..."

"Diana, I am your father. I don't know if you think having me as your father is something to be proud of, but you *can* be proud of your mother. In fact, if you ever say a word against her..."

What Dion would have done in that unlikely case, Diana never learned. She had to tell him that she was proud of him, that this was a happy day for her, that he could forever put an end to the fear that was freezing his face into a mask fit to frighten Cylons. She wanted to be a mother to soothe his fears, instead of a daughter.

She took two steps toward the bed, then stumbled and went to her knees. All her good intentions, and the words she'd planned to use for them, puffed away like air from a breached hull. She buried her face against Dion's chest and started crying so hard that she was barely aware of his arms going around her.

VII

Dion would have felt less helpless in the face of Diana's tears if he'd known why she was crying. He told himself firmly not to look on the dark side of things, not to assume that she was too appalled at his personal failings to control herself. He also told himself firmly that, with her iron self-control, she would be able to tell him herself in a few centons; he knew better than to try second-guessing a woman who might well have inherited her mother's impatience with men who made wild assumptions.

He still wasn't sure whether he was facing delight or disaster, so his arms held Diana in a rather mechanical grip, not at all what he'd imagined as his first embrace of father to daughter.

At last, Diana raised her head enough to wipe her eyes with a sleeve of her robe, then looked up. Incredibly, she was smiling. Then she stood up, combed a few snarls out of her hair with her fingers, bent over, and kissed Dion on the cheek.

"Thank you, father. Thank you for being...gallant enough to tell the story at all. Even more, for telling *me*. I can see why my mother saw...what she saw in you...and did what she did.

"I'm proud to have you as my father. I don't even remember now what I wanted him to be, in the days when I thought I'd learn. Maybe it was someone like you, maybe not. But... Well, I'm happy with how it's worked out."

Dion was barely listening. A weight equivalent to a combat-loaded battlestar seemed to be lifting from his shoulders, his heart, and his mind. He said nothing, didn't even lift a hand to squeeze Diana's. This was another time and place of magic, like the afternoon by the woodland pool when he came to know that he both wanted and loved Scylla. He would not break the spell with words.

Finally, Diana straightened up and explored her face with her hands. "Lords, I must look like a socialator who overestimated her stamina! I'll have to... What's wrong?"

He managed to smile. "That gesture -- worrying about your appearance to gain time... For a moment, I saw Scylla all over again. Then I realized she's never going to be completely gone again."

Diana swallowed. "I'm a Warrior, father -- like you. The Lords don't always send long lives to pilots."

"They didn't send it to Scylla, either, and what had she done to put herself in the way of death? Except for what she did that gave you life. I'm not going to make my first request to you that you stop flying! I'm not that big a fool. No, my first request as your father is that one of us tells Lieutenant Morgan, and plays that recording for him."

"Instead of Apollo?"

"Where are your wits, Diana? No, I meant *besides* Apollo."

"Why?"

Dion's first thought was that Diana was holding something back, his second that maybe Morgan hadn't told her about Captain Myron, his third that the two weren't mutually exclusive. So he followed the principle he'd heard in Basic Intelligence at the Academy -- "Never leave an ally lacking essential data." He told his daughter about the CJD investigator.

She listened with an increasingly sour look on her face. It was a mark of Dion's new trust in her that he didn't worry about whether she was now questioning his motives in telling her.

When he was finished, Diana made one or two impolite suggestions about the nature and habits of Captain Myron's parents. "Of course, Morgan will have to know. I'll go and tell him..."

"Go where? He's been released, and you haven't. If Doctor Senbi pages him, the Life Centre staff will know, and somebody might decide it'd be a good idea to tell Myron. *He* will probably bring the matter before the Commander, and I think Christopher would be grateful if that doesn't happen."

"He should be grateful enough to you for your 'great confession' to put up with almost anything," his daughter replied with another Scylla-like grin.

"Ordinary men should be. Battlestar commanders aren't ordinary men, as I'm sure you know." They were both silent, thinking of the unknown fate of the GALACTICA and Commander Adama. Dion was also thinking that Diana might be right, that Christopher would consider his "grand confession" a point in his favour. He wasn't quite ready to mention that, though; rationally, he knew she wouldn't question his motives, but in his gut, he still had doubts.

"I'll have Jones track Morgan down. Nobody asks *him* questions he doesn't want to answer, unless they want a torque wrench rammed up them sideways. We should have the Lieutenant here by lunch."

Too late, he remembered Diana had said Apollo wouldn't be back from patrol until much later. Not entirely to his surprise, she let it pass. That was just as well; if she'd seemed overly solicitous for Apollo's feelings in the matter, he might have presumed rather far on the strength of one meeting. Something to the effect of, "What right does Apollo have to interfere with something that's personally vital to you?"

She wasn't granting him that right, which might not promise too well for their sealing. Perhaps he was doing Captain Apollo an injustice, but it would have been the Lords' own miracle if somebody loaded with all of Adama's expectations for his sons hadn't turned out a bit of a prig. He wanted for Diana everything that her mother hadn't been able to have, and somehow doubted she could find it with Apollo.

"Good," Diana said. "Morgan has...one or two things you should know about him. Once we don't have any secrets from each other, I think we can make a pretty good team to draw Captain Myron's charge."

"We..." Diana, Morgan, and him. Maybe Apollo -- and Dion wouldn't mind seeing how the Captain dealt with this kind of situation. If he did the right thing, maybe he was the man for Diana...

And maybe you should stop matchmaking for a daughter you just acknowledged less than a centar ago!

Maybe, Dion admitted. But it would be a while before he was his usual cool-headed self where Diana was concerned. Maybe yahrens, maybe not until well after she and Apollo were sealed -- and if it happened that way, the least he could do was not speak impulsively.

It was ironic, that having spoken out, his next duty to his daughter was to keep silent. But as long as he had a daughter to have duties toward...

"We should be able to do the job," he said, squeezing Diana's hand.

OFFICIAL GUIDE-LINES FOR PURPLE AND ORANGE?/OSIRIS PUBLICATIONS

For the benefit of the many individuals who have requested information on writing and illustrating for PURPLE AND ORANGE? and OSIRIS Publications, we are reprinting the guide-lines which have appeared in previous issues.

OSIRIS Publications has a professionally-trained editorial staff. PURPLE AND ORANGE?, although written by non-professionals, is and will continue to be handled in as professional a manner possible. The following guide-lines should be observed by anyone submitting material to PURPLE AND ORANGE? or to OSIRIS Publications.

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2. Written material should be neatly typed on 8½ x 11 white paper, double-spaced. Only one side of the page should be used, and all pages must be numbered. Hand-written or hand-printed manuscripts will be accepted only at the discretion of the editor; these should be double-spaced on 8½ x 11 lined white paper. The editorial staff reserves the right to reject any manuscript not deemed to be sufficiently legible.
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"WHY DID IT HAVE TO BE ...?"

H. Ravenwood



"Why Did It Have to Be...?"

(By H. Ravenwood)

When scanners aboard the OSIRIS indicated the remains of a once-thriving civilisation on a previously uncharted planet, Sentiologist 1/C Tanis and Captain Diana led a survey team down for an in-depth exploration. Within a matter of days, they had encountered disasters ranging from brief disappearances to death, the theft of a tile of great significance, and a huge chamber filled with a myriad of rhythmically humming...snakes.

The red moons of Byzel -- the "World Where All Things Speak" -- moved into conjunction, an event greeted by a wild chorus from the survivors of the once-powerful beings of the planet; there followed two mind-numbing nights of primal madness. Lieutenant Morgan wandered into the desert, drawn by a summons impossible to ignore; Doctor Lupus kept Tanis from a second and possibly similar late-night rendezvous with the guardians of the ancient city. But no one protected Sergeant Minerva, the only possible witness to the theft of the missing tile, and her headlong terror-stricken flight ended when an unknown assailant sent her tumbling off the edge of a cliff.

Diana, unaware of Minerva's peril, searched for Morgan, but began to fear for her own sanity when the man appeared, then vanished again almost before her eyes. All the search party found was a massive and incredibly old amphitheatre in the desert. There, Morgan's tracks ended -- as did those of a huge serpent. Neither could be found.

Nothing could keep Tanis from exploring that amphitheatre. While his colleagues excavated a strategic dome and searched for the missing Minerva, he led a group of explorers into the desert. Separated from his crew, alone and unprotected, he suddenly came face to face with his own private horror.

He scabbled in the sand. The magnificent creature touched him with its forked red tongue, and he felt a whispered summons in his mind. He couldn't even scream. The thing leaned closer...

Part X

Tanis sobbed a prayer to some alien deity from a culture he'd once studied -- why it came to mind, he couldn't have said. His terror overwhelmed all conscious thought, leaving only the whispered plea to the half-remembered god, little more than a name repeated in a babbling voice, as though the simple syllables would be an effective charm to ward off the snake's attack.

The serpent swayed above him for a moment, then drew back. Tanis gasped in relief; he thought he would faint.

He felt a sudden wave of regret. *There is too much fear. He would become insane...*

The sentiologist started at the words and emotion. He was shocked to his soul, still quaking with fear and rooted to the sand, but... *I heard something in my mind...!*

There was only the serpent peering at him, and he knew with a fatalistic sense of inevitability that he had completely lost his mind, that it was time to die.

The serpent suddenly reared away from him, its massive hooded head turning to stare elsewhere.

Tanis felt as though some vital essence of himself were draining away as that hypnotically alluring stare was broken; he took a deep, shuddering breath, feeling death very near, and wondered what the next few microns would hold. Sensation drifted away, as did tension; he collapsed limply onto the hot, shifting sands. The light breeze and gently abrasive grains immediately began the task of covering him under their protection.

A bolt of laser fire lanced across the desert.

The serpent stared warily at Quetzal and Skyler, who crouched atop a nearby dune, watching in horror and fascination. Then, with a quiet and unhurried dignity, it coiled itself together and vanished. The two humans stared open-mouthed at the empty expanse of sand, with only the still form of the sentiologist visible on the wind-swept plain.

"Why'd you jar my arm?" Skyler demanded, his weapon still in his hand as he and his companion ran toward the unconscious man. "You should've let me shoot it!"

"Shoot what?" Quetzal responded in awestruck tones. "There's nothing there!" He slowed to study the unmistakable tracks that marked the ground -- a trail that ended abruptly where the snake had ceased to be. "And if it *was* here, it was magnificent, and so big! I couldn't just let you kill it -- if we're even capable of killing something like that!"

"What about Tanis?" Skyler retorted. "It was threatening him!"

"Well, it didn't seem to be hurting him any! But where did it go? Snakes don't just *vanish*..."

Skyler knelt over Tanis. Amazingly, the man was still breathing. The sentiologist's eyes opened, and he stared in bewilderment at the Warrior. "What in Hades happened? Where am I?" he asked.

Quetzal and Skyler exchanged worried looks. "You don't remember?" Quetzal ventured.

"Would I ask if I did?" Tanis sounded impatient, his usual manner when dealing with the military.

"We'll fill you in on the way back to the amphitheatre. Think you can walk?"

"Of course, I can walk!" Tanis snapped back. He did, however, find Skyler's assistance necessary to get back to his feet, and his legs wobbled so badly that he needed support for the short walk back to the desert temple.

Confronted with witnesses and evidence, the sentiologist was forced to accept what he didn't remember. He had, indeed, had an encounter with an immense serpent, a monster that had vanished completely in the wink of an eye -- if the memories of the other men were correct. Shuddering, he concurred with Skyler's opinion -- the Warrior should have been allowed to shoot it.

* * * * *

Diana stared at the ceiling of her cubicle, not really seeing it. With so little sleep the night before, and that little haunted by restless nightmares, it was no surprise that she'd developed a severe headache in Byzel's miserable climate -- especially after having to deal with Tanis again. Lupus had given her some kind of pill and sent her to take a nap, but she couldn't sleep. The medication eased the pain, but her mental turmoil refused to go away.

Morgan was gone, missing for two days; she'd searched for him, but his trail ended in the desert. But what truly frightened her, sent cold shivers through her, was that he appeared to her out in that desert, then vanished again into nothingness. She knew people didn't vanish into thin air; she knew she'd been seeing things. Was this planet affecting her sanity?

She shook her head fiercely, closing her eyes against threatening tears, then rolled over, punching the thin pillow to try and make it more comfortable. She was unsure whether she should try to forget what she thought she'd seen, or try to rationalize it away. She hated the thought of having to confess to Doctor Elara, the ship's psychologist, that she was seeing things. But if she tried to hide it, and it proved a symptom of some worse mental disorder...

What could she do?

She shook her head again, this time with determination. *Worry about that later. There are more urgent matters now.* Morgan was gone, and so was Minerva. Talos had a search party out looking for her, but Diana wasn't sure they'd find anything more of the young Sergeant than she had of Morgan.

Hopefully, doubling the guards and keeping closer tabs on people would take care of the problem of any additional vanishing personnel. Whatever on this world was responsible for the disappearance of

the Warriors, perhaps it could be detected now, if they kept a closer watch.

A timid knock on the cubicle door broke her concentration. "Yes?" she called, grateful for the interruption that allowed her to momentarily forget her fears -- even if it was probably only another problem, something else to keep her up nights.

"Captain?" It was Lieutenant Gregory. "We've found Minerva. The doctor's examining her now."

Diana opened the door. "Where'd you find her? How is she?" she demanded.

"She was in the Gap, that big gully that divides the northern sector of the city. She's still alive, but we don't know how badly hurt she is," Gregory replied rapidly.

"What else?" Diana demanded, catching a hint of anger in his voice, and noticing that the young pilot's jaw was firmly set; something vengeful glowed in his dark eyes.

"Captain, she said somebody pushed her."

She stared back at him, anger and dismay in her own eyes. "Did she say who?"

The man shook his head. "She didn't know, and she passed out before anyone else got close enough to hear or talk to her. Captain Talos is with her; I told him what she said, and he's keeping guard. He'll talk to her if she regains consciousness. In the meantime, he said I should wake you."

"He was right. Let's get going."

* * * * *

Freya's hands clenched tightly at her sides as she stared at the poor broken bundle of grey and white that Menkar had unearthed. Living, it had been her bast Elidor.

Her face was a cold, hard mask, and every line and curve of her body held the tautness of a drawn bowstring. Her sweet, scrawny little bast of unknown pedigree was dead, nothing but a limp, dusty carcass in Menkar's big hands. Somehow, her small friend had managed to get himself under the sand-slide that had half-buried Menkar and Corvus; but the bast's body hadn't been noticed when they dug the two men out -- Elidor was dead.

"I'm sorry, Freya," the big, bluff man muttered, not looking at her. Alexandra, standing at her side, murmured similar words of sympathy, but Freya barely heard either of them. The techs who had joined in the search for the missing animal, first by calling for it and then by digging, drew away, seeming to realize the futility of their presence.

"So...ya want us to bury him?" Menkar asked meekly. He was humbled in the face of death, displaying none of his usual disregard for procedure or mockery of seriousness.

"Do it like the basts here," she replied woodenly. "Under a patch of that weed stuff Gregory found, like all the other basts here. Do it right." Her gaze had never left Elidor; now, abruptly, she turned away, staring for a moment at the chimney that marked the end of the trench they'd been digging.

Menkar's movements were awkward as he half-crawled out of that trench, careful not to drop or disarrange his pitiful burden. The limp corpse rested securely in his strong hands.

"Are you all right, Freya?" Alexandra asked somewhat anxiously.

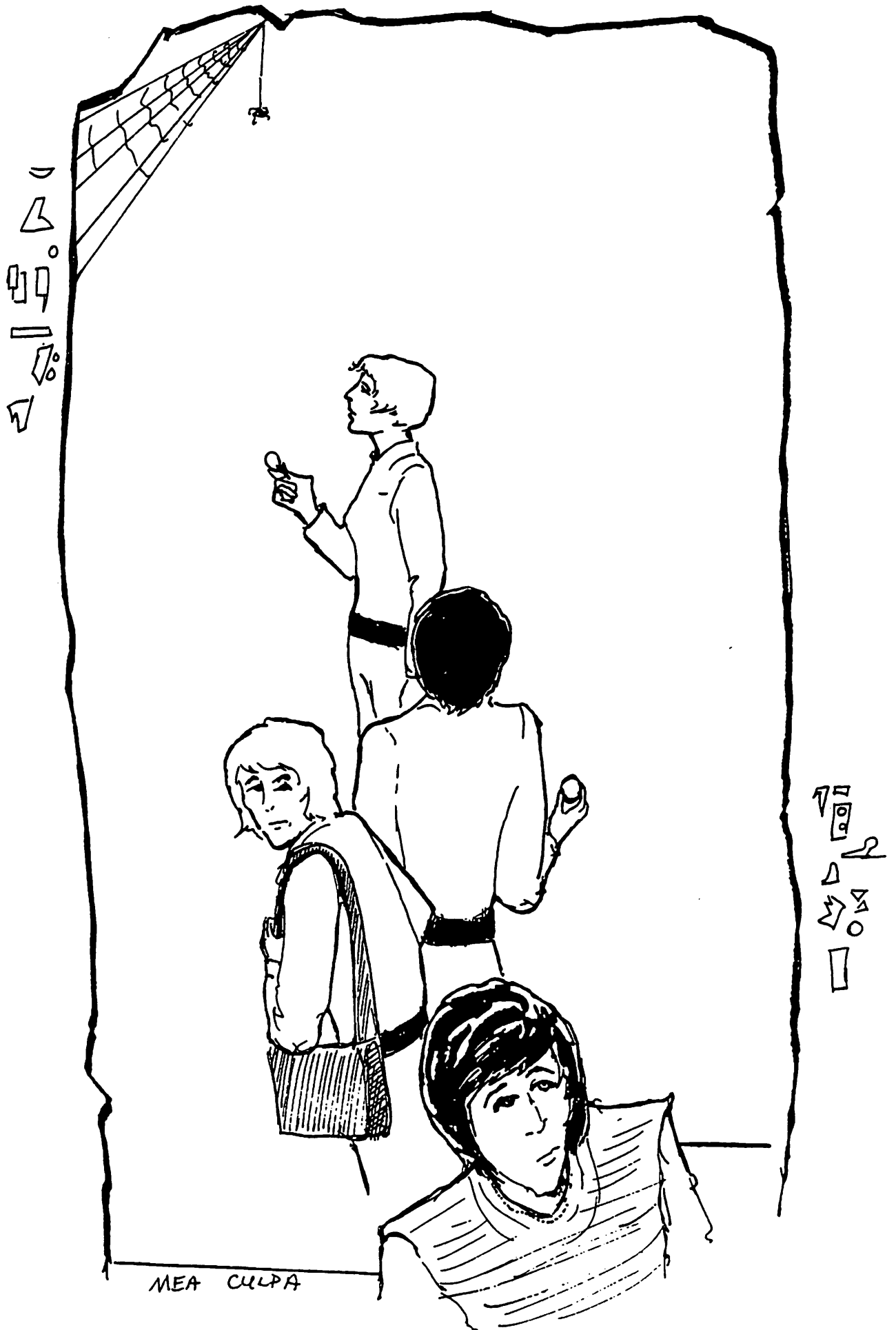
"I hear you. I'm fine."

"There was nothing we could do... That's where the brace gave... He was probably chasing spiders or..."

"Like he did in my quarters, so I'd never have to see them." She turned back to her fellow Warrior. There were some things she preferred not to show people, and this was a very public place; she would wait for privacy. "He's just a bast. Let's go help Menkar. He's such a lout, he can't do anything right unless you stand over him and dictate every move..."

* * * * *

The midday sun was fierce, and most of the Colonial personnel sequestered themselves in their shelters, trying to avoid it. As a consequence, the site was very still. Even the native inhabitants -- the numerous serpents, felines, and assorted insects -- had fled to cover.



Not far from Watch Point Eleven, one man's concession to the climate was to discard his tunic and crouch in the shadows of a crumbling wall as he worked. Ashur was a man of average height and build. His short, dark hair, which receded high on his forehead, held no trace of grey, nor did his moustache. His face and upper body were well-tanned from his time on Byzel -- he'd been there from the beginning -- and his flesh was firm and well-muscled despite his advancing age, the mark of a man who kept himself in good shape. He'd left a tenured and highly respected post in the Sagittaran Liberal Arts Academy's Department of Historical Studies to join the OSIRIS expedition, and had never regretted it. His expertise in reading and translating ancient Colonial writings was unquestioned; wide training in alien languages and assorted epigraphic systems made him invaluable in his field -- he'd taught several of his colleagues, even Tanis, a few things during the course of the mission, and Communications was as likely to call on him as on their own cryptographers to decipher intercepted alien signals.

There was a slight frown on his face as he studied the hieroglyphic symbols carved into the wall before him; one hand followed the engravings while the other traced them onto the pad balanced on his knee. He'd been at the job all morning, and could be as single-minded as Tanis when such a tantalizing project had his attention.

Finally, he sat back, still with a puzzled expression on his face. The symbols Freya and Tanis had recalled from the Mokyar Collections, with which he was also familiar, were easily recognizable despite the differences in time, texture, and individual distortion had made in them. But some of the figures didn't seem...*right*, didn't seem to belong to the system as Ashur had figured it out. As he'd so often told stubborn students, that meant one should try some other system -- work it again as though it were a code to be broken, find the common symbols and meanings that would make sense to the culture that had created them, and proceed from there to create a different alphabet, a new syllabic or pictographic system, one that better fit the available evidence. But now, he himself was reluctant to do so.

He'd been so sure. Everything had fit perfectly with the pictographic system forming in his mind -- until now. All the evidence had continued to support it -- until now. And he'd been so sure he was on the right track in deciphering the Byzellian materials...

But this...! It doesn't seem right, doesn't make any sense. Unless two -- or more! -- cultures occupied this city at different times -- or maybe even concurrently -- without affecting each other's writings significantly...?

The systems had to be similar, he was sure. Perhaps one had developed from the other, or both had evolved from a common, more ancient mother system. Had the new culture merely attempted to copy the ways of the old, and imperfectly used their written language?

Or maybe he was just trying to rationalize his own mind-set, convince himself he was right, so he wouldn't have to follow his own advice and integrate the various symbols and glyphs. If it was good enough for his students, he ought to be adult enough to accept that he might be wrong.

But who created this place? Who built it, then lost -- or abandoned -- it?

All that was left were snakes, basts, and bugs. All the passages, all the means of access to the various buildings, were huge rounded things. But some of the artifacts they were recovering suggested builders of a bipedal nature -- or so several specialists in those areas insisted.

For Ashur, these writings and carvings were what would tell the tale, would reveal what the creators and builders of this place had to say about themselves and their world.

Perhaps we'll have to go back to the Mokyar Collections again. There might be more hidden in those old galactic legends than is readily apparent. Perhaps there are other references to Byzel, maybe under some other name...

At any rate, all their speculations meant nothing until they had firmer evidence. And he could well be the one to provide that evidence. *This world is definitely an enigma...*

He'd copied all the carvings on his bit of wall. Still wearing a preoccupied expression, he rose to his feet, studying the drawings on his sheets of paper. Long strides quickly carried him across sand, rock, and scrub as he headed back to his makeshift lab. He'd missed the noon meal, but that minor inconvenience was totally irrelevant. His mind was caught up in a maze of Byzel's weaving...

One man had watched him work through the hot midday centars. Renet knew Ashur's abilities. Very purposefully, he followed the epigraphist across the still-deserted site.

For several long centons, Talos studied the tentative duty roster Dymos had prepared, then tossed it onto the table to join the day's personnel check-in log. The young Lieutenant standing before him was sweating, as much from the Captain's presence as from the oppressive heat; only Green Squadron's flight commander could demand and get instant servility from the temperamental pilot, and Dymos was quaking in his boots at the mere knowledge that his work was the object of Talos' consideration.

If the Captain didn't approve of the new guard rotation, or if some other technician or Warrior had slipped through the personnel checks like Minerva had... If it hadn't been for the Warrior's dark skin, he would have been as pale as chalk.

"Not bad, Lieutenant," Talos commented abruptly. "Every watch point is secured with a double watch, and it appears all our personnel are now familiar with required procedures and location checks..."

"However, we are not likely to require the rosters at all, and our procedures will doubtless undergo drastic revision within the centar," a new voice interrupted.

Dymos shrank in fearful anticipation. *What have I done now?*

"Why?" Talos demanded of the man who entered the security base.

Hannibal smiled enigmatically. "Commander Christopher, in his infinite wisdom, has seen fit to send us some more Security personnel. In charge of them is...Captain Oisin."

Talos swore.

"The man approacheth even now, with his retinue in tow, and I'm quite certain he will immediately take all security measures out of your incompetent hands, and start rearranging things to suit himself." Hannibal seated himself on the edge of the table and crossed his arms.

The fair-haired squadron commander's language became even more colourful and vitriolic.

"However, if I might suggest something..."

Talos was immediately silent and attentive. He and Hannibal knew each other well, and understood one another better than most.

"If he gets too out of hand, assure him that if this becomes a repeat of that Aquarian moon incident, you only want to help."

The incident meant nothing to Talos, but he was certain there was something behind it. "You didn't hear a thing, Lieutenant," he hissed at Dymos. To Hannibal, "Tell me more."

The engineer grinned, but merely shrugged, his eyes significantly on the open doorway.

In a moment, that doorway was filled by a broad-shouldered, red-haired man who bore an unmistakable stamp of arrogance on his handsome, bearded features. Oisin studied the room somewhat disdainfully before strutting toward the trio at the table.

"I am here to assume command of camp security," he announced. "As we all know each other, I won't bother with introductions, but will get right to work." His voice turned somewhat condescending. "If I may see what safety precautions you have been trying to this point..." Before anyone could object, he swept the newly-completed guard roster off the table, along with the check-in logs. "My thanks for your assistance up to this time, Captain," he added pointedly. "This is all in capable hands now."

He turned away, dismissing the Warriors as if without any further thought. Several Security men shuffled uneasily at the door. Between Oisin's attitude and Talos' occasionally wicked temper...

Talos glared at the Security Captain's back for a moment, then exchanged a look with Hannibal. He waved Dymos toward the door before leaning over to speak to Oisin in a low voice.

"Just let me know if it gets out of hand, Captain, and I'll be glad to help," he promised quietly. "We wouldn't want a repeat of that incident... The Aquarian moon, wasn't it?"

He retained a calm demeanour as Oisin jerked around to face him. "How in Hades...?"

Talos shrugged, suppressing a whoop of pleasure at the rage and discomfort on the other man's face, which had turned nearly as red as his hair. "Accessed the wrong file once. You know how we fighter jockeys are all thumbs when it comes to computers." He strolled away before Oisin could respond.

Hannibal looked unconcerned as the Security officer glared at him. "Warriors... Who can tell?"

* * * * *

It was no longer safe to keep watching Ashur. Whatever the man discovered from his work, the site was getting too busy; personnel were stirring again. And he, Renet, was due at his own work-site. Later...

If this night was like most others, the city would become quiet, with the Colonials sleeping or relaxing privately somewhere. He could come here then, sneak into Ashur's lab, access his computer files. Whatever Ashur learned, he would learn, too.

Renet stepped briskly into the sunlight and strode away, looking absorbed in his work. No one paid him any special attention, although one young Security guard did note that he'd chosen an unusual place to sit for a centar...

In his small lab, Ashur stared unseeingly at the far wall. His frown of concentration was gone, his nervous habit of tapping his stylus against the lab desk stilled.

He was stunned. His conclusion was incredible. Worse, it actually made sense, fit all the data he had.

But it can't possibly be true...! There's no way... Unless...

* * * * *

"Ugh!"

"I agree." *Whole-heartedly...*

"This whole corridor's full of spider webs, Corvus. How long are you going to keep running into them before you learn to watch where you're going?"

"Shut up, and get this gunk off me!" the tech replied miserably, flailing at the sticky webbing that covered his face and shirt. He wasn't really careless, just young and enthusiastic.

The four Colonials huddled closely in the rounded corridor, creating a small pool of light with their arc lamps. Thoth and Volsung tried to help Corvus shed his cocoon-like covering, while the distaff member of their party, Sergeant Persephone, kept a wary eye on their surroundings. There wasn't much to see -- the uneven corridor; strange hieroglyphics glowing in the small circle of illumination; darkness before them, broken by reflections of light against wall and web; darkness behind them; spider webs draped randomly across the hall, side passages, occasional niches, and vents.

The decision to map the labyrinth beneath the city was not one any of this group would have made, but they obeyed the orders of their respective superiors. Diana's command had sent the Warriors; Tanis had sent the techs. Persephone and Thoth weren't pleased about it; with every centon, Corvus and Volsung were becoming happier about their military escort. The cool, eerily timeless tunnels left them all feeling cut off from their comrades and the rest of the sun-lit world above them, giving rise to a hidden claustrophobia in all of them.

"Well," Volsung observed, "at least our way out will be well marked." He pointedly studied the torn webbing.

Corvus shuddered. His face was clean, but his clothes were layered with webs, and his hands retained a horrible sticky feeling.

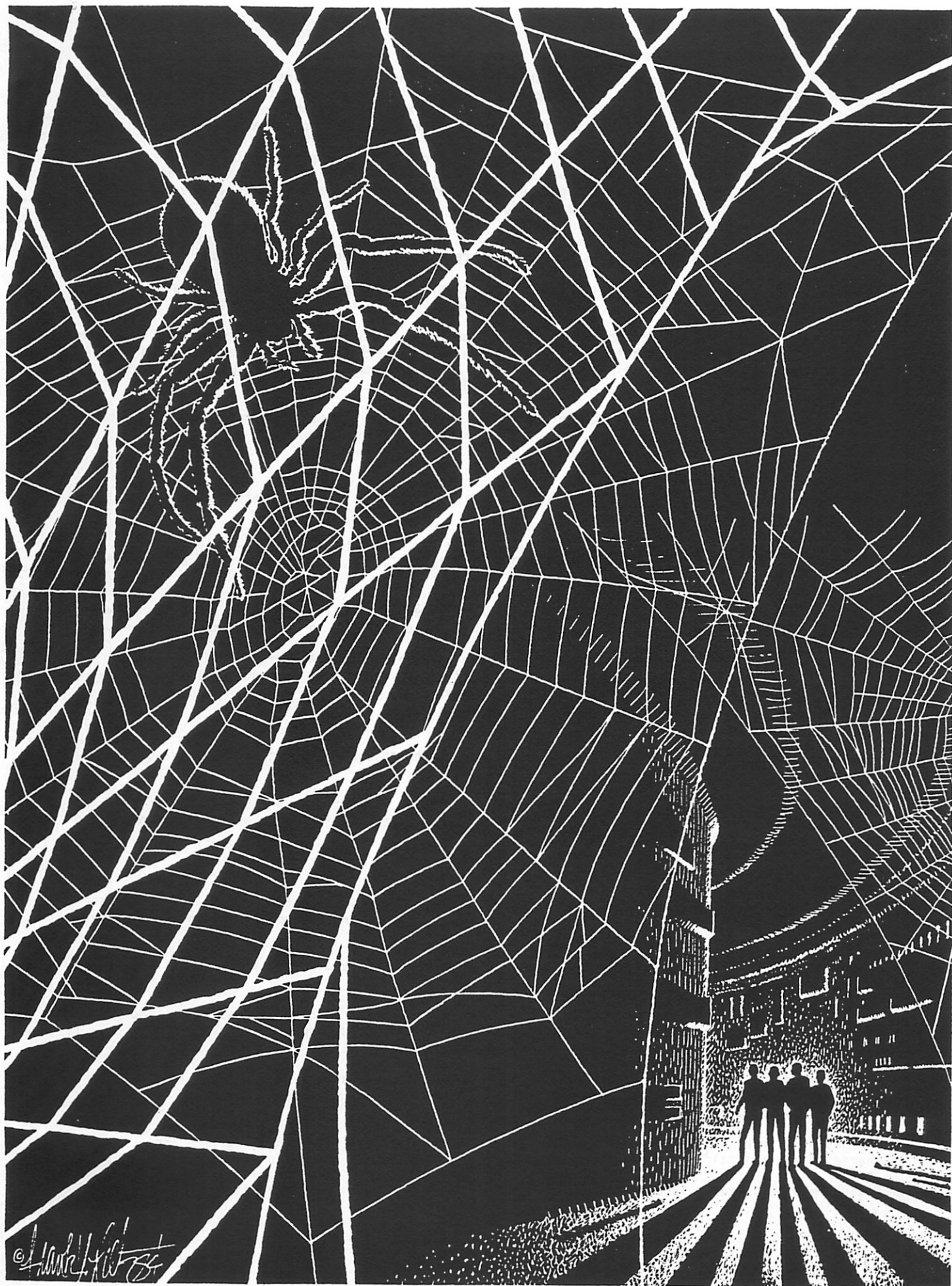
"Let's get going," Thoth suggested, staring ahead into the darkness. Bad as the heat outside was, much as his sunburnt back pained him, he'd still prefer to be back in the trenches, listening to Freya's sarcastic tongue.

The four Colonials moved on, their voices a low murmur that echoed spookily as they noted passage turnings, markings, and side tunnels for a computer layout of the maze.

Behind them, a busy little arachnid dropped from ceiling to floor as it began to repair the damage the clumsy, careless humans had caused to its fine web. In a moment, another of its multi-legged kind joined the effort.

* * * * *

"Tanis is back!"



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Diana had mixed feelings as she heard the announcement. She was, of course, pleased to have everyone back safely from the monument in the desert -- assuming, that is, that Tanis *had* brought them all back safely. But the more she saw of the sentiologist, the less she found herself liking him. And it was early for him to be returning from a prime site; she hoped no one else was injured.

Standing in the entrance of the mess hall and shading her eyes with one hand, she watched the landram bounce closer. The afternoon sun was quite bright, and reflections blinded her for a moment. When she could see again, she was facing Lieutenant Quetzal and Sergeant Skyler, who had both leaped from the moving vehicle and crossed the last few yards on foot.

"Captain," Quetzal stated formally, "we're here to make a report on the day's activities." His voice held repressed excitement. Skyler looked more doubtful. What had they found this time?

The landram continued to its temporary garage. Apparently, whatever they'd found, Tanis was not yet prepared to make a report to her. Just as well, then; he could talk to Talos later.

"Fine, Lieutenant," she said to the tall man. "Come on in." She expected to hear about something buried in the sands of the amphitheatre, or of a newly-discovered cavern or piece of architecture. She was utterly unconcerned with what she viewed as Tanis's attempt at a snub; there was too much on her mind to allow one recalcitrant sentiologist to disturb her.

"Uh, Captain, I think Sentiologist Tanis ought to be here when we make our report," Skyler began hesitantly. Both men seemed uneasy, and Diana looked questioningly at them.

What in Hades did they find?

But there was Tanis, striding across the sand like he owned the entire planet. *All right, I can wait a few more centons to find out...*

The sentiologist acknowledged her presence with a curt nod -- he looked pale -- then continued into the mess hall; he didn't say a word. Quetzal and Skyler followed him, with a little more deference to their commanding officer.

The Captain took her place at the table Tanis had chosen; Quetzal and Skyler sat down as well. Talos and Hannibal, in the midst of a quick meal, moved close enough to hear whatever might be said.

Diana took a deep breath. There was no more reason for stalling. "All right, if everyone is now gathered, may I please have a report? What did you find out there that has you all so damned scared to tell me about it?" *Oh, Lords, what if it's Morgan?*

"Just a centon."

The woman's fists clenched at the new interruption. The thought that they might have discovered Morgan's body left her chilled.

"As Chief of Security in this camp, I naturally expect to be present at any and all debriefings that might have a bearing on my responsibilities," Oisín enunciated with military precision as he seated himself without waiting for an invitation.

Diana no longer cared. She wanted that report.

"What in Hades are you doing here?" Tanis demanded ungraciously, staring at Oisín. He liked Security personnel even less than he liked most Warriors. *Now, I've got two blasted redheads to deal with! Damn!*

"Augmenting camp security," the man replied coolly. Diana kept a distant silence, but anyone who knew her well could have read the damped fire in her eyes.

"We've already got enough people, optimum size party for this type of dig," Tanis complained. "We don't need anyone else to go tramping around, messing things up, destroying artifacts." *If only I had more scientists, and fewer of these damned, useless Warriors...*

"Considering the nature and gravity of the reports we've received from your camp, it didn't take much to convince Commander Christopher that increased security was necessary here. And as Major Asisti has entrusted the mission site to me..."

"As Security Chief, of course," Diana inserted with an icy calm she didn't feel. "Tanis retains charge of the scientific personnel and their work, and I remain in command of this expedition."

Oisín's mouth tightened into a near-snarl. For once, Tanis could have cheered the woman's words.

"And now that all concerned personnel are finally here, Tanis and Lieutenant Quetzal can give their reports," Diana finished with a decidedly threatening tone of command.

"I doubt if you're concerned with my work on the temple," Tanis said after an expectant moment, "so I'll let the Lieutenant tell you about what he thinks he saw in the desert."

What he thinks he saw? Morgan...?

Quetzal nervously exchanged glances with Skyler before speaking. "We saw a native life form..."

"Yes?"

"A giant snake, Captain. Huge, and magnificent -- and it disappeared, just like that!" He snapped his fingers for emphasis. "We didn't feel it was proper to shoot it without warning or without any attempt to communicate, so we don't know how it might react to our weaponry..."

Talos leaned closer; Hannibal listened intently. Oisin started to figure what this might mean to his defence perimeter. Diana's face was pale; she closed her eyes. *We saw tracks of something big out there...*

"The strange part was, it seemed to be...doing something...to Sentiologist Tanis, Captain... That is, it was swaying in front of him, and he was watching it... And after it left, he didn't remember anything!"

Diana glanced at Tanis, who shrugged his shoulders, unable to contain embarrassment and an uneasy sense of dread. "Is that true?" she demanded.

"I don't know. I don't remember anything about the incident they insist happened. I saw tracks that might have been made by something serpentine, but I didn't see any snakes!"

And you don't want to, either, do you? But is this what happened to Morgan? Giant snakes that affected his mind, made him forget...?

"You're absolutely certain about this?" she asked slowly.

Tanis grimaced, but the two Warriors nodded positively. They knew what they'd seen.

"Giant snakes that can hypnotize people..." Oisin mused. He looked like a man inspired. Here was something he could react to without interference.

"We don't know..." Tanis began.

He was echoed by Diana's, "That can't be..."

"We'll call in all personnel for the day," Oisin continued briskly, ignoring the weak objections from the people most personally involved with what the snake might or might not have done. "Let everyone know, and gather immediately at the base camp," he ordered in a louder voice. The purpose of the Security men lounging around the mess hall became clear, as they hurried to obey his orders.

"Let's not go overboard," Talos demurred, staring with undisguised disgust at the Security men.

"All guard posts are to maintain constant contact with our base," Oisin went on, contemplating further orders. "I suggest a meeting of all senior officers as soon as it can be arranged, to discuss security measures and the future of this expedition. Tanis, you are to see Doctor Lupus as soon as possible. He may be able to tell us something about your condition."

"My condition? *What* condition? There's absolutely nothing wrong with me! I hope that blasted snake gets *him*!" Tanis swore angrily as the Security officer departed.

Diana rested her head in her hands. "Lords, why me?" she moaned. "And why *him*, of all people?"

* * * * *

Shari's feet skimmed the hot ground as she raced over the sand in the afternoon sun. When Oisin's orders came, Sept had sent her to find Renet, the only person still unaccounted for.

She had an idea where he might be. The senior sentiologist had established his own small base of operations just beyond the city limits, as the Colonials had defined them. Any view of his small cluster of ruins was obscured by a low ridge; his chosen site was practically invisible from even the nearest guardpost. Renet spent much of his time there, away from Tanis and the others, working

on his own projects.

The ridge provided a small amount of shade from the afternoon sun, but also blocked what little breeze swept over the site. The young woman paused to catch her breath, wiping perspiration from her forehead and throat, pushing tendrils of clinging hair from her face. Colonial uniforms, however practical they might be elsewhere, were not designed for this climate; Shari was glad Tanis had decreed standard tech clothing unnecessary here. She pitied the Warriors, who had no such permission to don more appropriate apparel, but were forced to remain in uniform.

Her conscience prodded her on. Some inadequately explained danger threatened their camp, and Captain Oisin wanted everyone gathered as quickly as possible. The Security officer hadn't seemed too concerned, however, so it probably wasn't very important; nevertheless, she had to find Renet.

He probably just wants to tell us about some storm coming. Gaius stares at his equipment, and Tefnut prattles about fronts and pressure zones, and the military gets hysterical. We survived the last storm, and if it hadn't been for those dumb Warriors wandering off and getting lost, nobody'd think anything of it. Now, they're paranoid about dust puffs! At least, Tanis knows what to do... In her eyes, her superior could do no wrong, and she'd adopted his slightly condescending attitude toward the military.

Shari stuck her head into the arched opening to Renet's chosen work-place. There was no door -- shade and a wind-screen were the only protection necessary from the elements. "Renet?"

There was no answer, so she stepped into the chamber. The low-ceilinged room was as immaculate and perfect as Renet himself tried to be, with everything in neat order on the scattering of tables. She glanced briefly at the equipment and the collection of artifacts before crossing the room to look into the next chamber.

There was another table in that small store-room, along with several storage boxes that had contained Renet's equipment, or that would contain materials from Byzel as soon as the sentiologist finished his work with them. But something about the table struck her as strange. It stuck out from the wall at a peculiar angle, and it seemed cluttered, as if someone had dropped the objects on it, then simply dumped them back in a hasty mess.

She stepped closer, staring at the scattered stone pieces, and began to feel anger. *These are tiles, panels from wall murals!* Tanis had expressly forbidden removing such things from their original locations -- and these had to have come from all over the site!

Now that she was alongside the table, she could see a hole in the paved stone floor, with one piece of stone lying atop another. The small cache was empty, but sand clinging to some of the tiles looked as if it could have come from the lining of the small pit.

She heard a noise, a boot scraping on stone, and whirled about to face Renet, who stared at her from the entrance. He looked disconcerted, unsure.

"You moved these artifacts!" she accused indignantly. "How could you do that? We're not supposed to act like tomb-robbers!"

"I wanted to study these. They have certain characteristics..." he began smoothly. He had one hand behind his back. "I'm sure you can understand how a fellow professional..."

"Professional? This isn't professional!" she continued in earnest outrage, her voice rising. "This is what gave sentiology such a bad name back in the early days! Tanis doesn't want us doing this!"

The mention of his enemy's name brought ugly rage to the man's face. *And this girl is one of his proteges...* She'll be sure to carry back word...

His decision was made.

Shari gasped, turning pale as Renet's hand came into view; he held a laser pointed unwaveringly at her. She took a step back, nearly collapsing against the wall. There was no place to run.

"Renet...?"

"A pity you simply refuse to understand. Perhaps you will understand this," he said -- and there was no pity in his cold voice. He took careful aim, and pressed the trigger.

(To be continued.)



MEA CULPA

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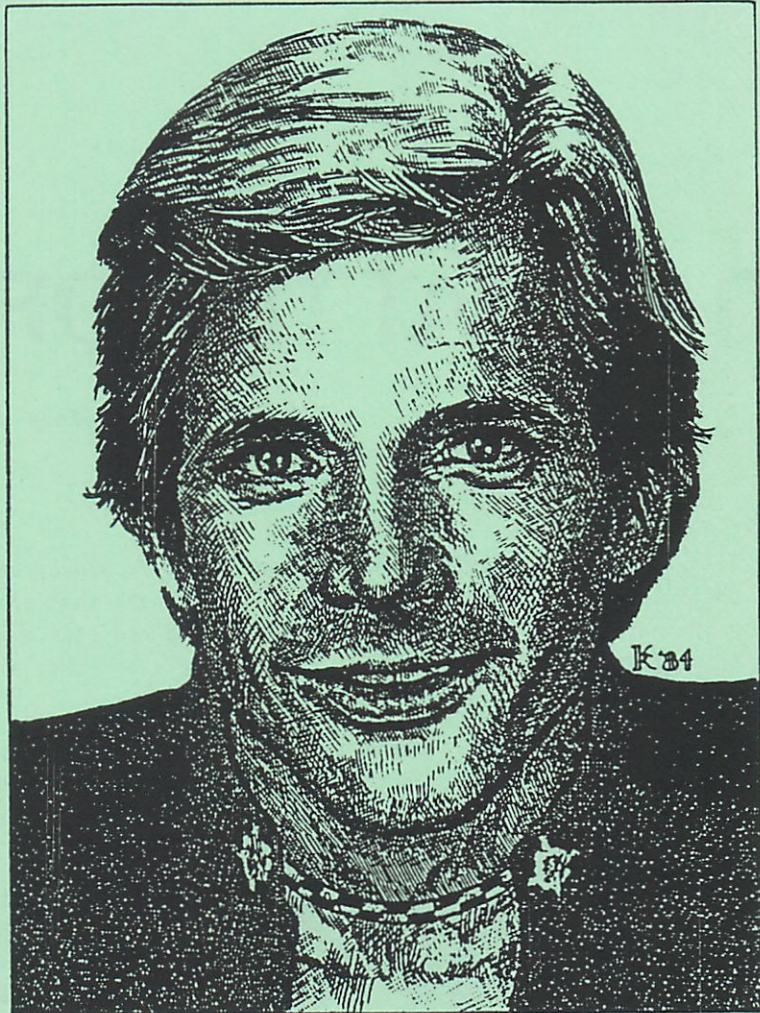
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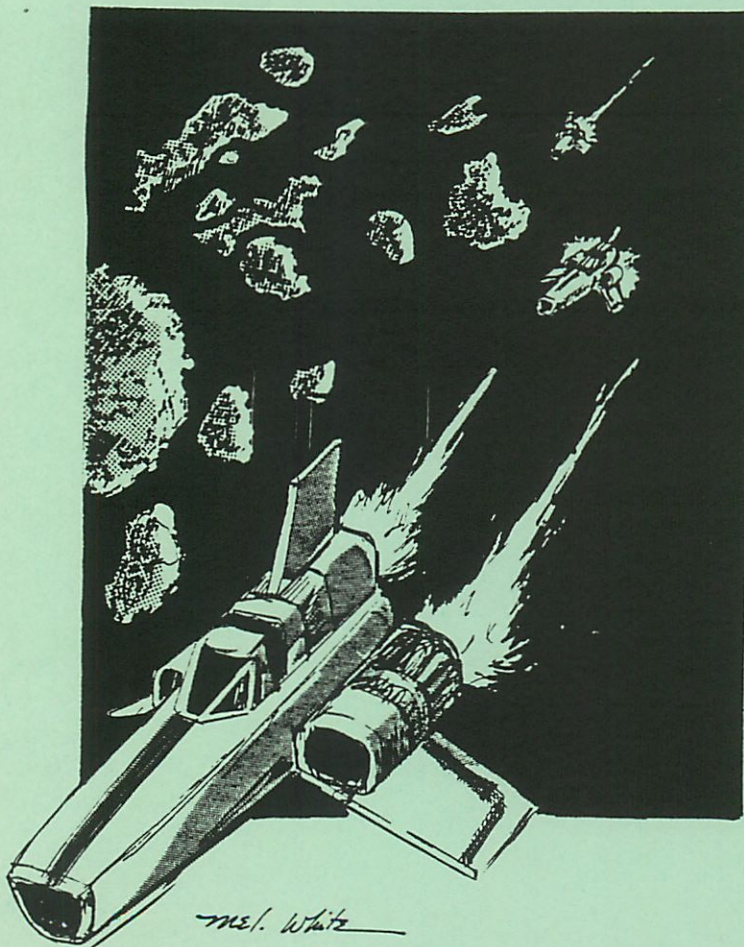
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